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Preview

Star took a deep breath. "I... I had a dream, a few nights ago, about an approaching darkness. StarClan cats were there, and so were my ancestors, the Tribe of Endless Hunting. They warned me of... of a coming darkness, a darkness that would cast some of the darkest shadows upon the forest."

Goldheart turned to Star, eyes wide with fear. "They said that to you?"

"Yes," Star nodded, looking more fearful by the heartbeat at Goldheart's expression.

"*My* dreams... they didn't have any StarClan cats... just darkness, blood, and pain... and something ending it all..." Goldheart breathed, barely audible.

It seemed to Echoheart that Goldheart had forgotten that she, Whispersong, and Star were there; his orange eyes were wide, unfocused, and unblinking as he stared across the camp.

Echoheart looked at the medicine cat in concern. What did he know that she, Whispersong, or Star didn't?

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Thank you, and enjoy reading!

Allegiances

DawnClan

Leader: ***Eveningstar***- large gray tom with tan flecks and a white underbelly

Deputy: ***Sunfur***- orange-brown she-cat with black flecks and long black-tipped tail

Medicine cat: ***Goldheart***- vibrant orange tabby tom with light orange eyes

*Apprentice: Yellowflower

Warriors:

Aspenleaf- cream-furred she-cat with pale green eyes

Bronzepelt- dark red-orange tom with lighter muzzle and yellow eyes

Clovertail- black-furred she-cat with green eyes

Creekfall- pale silver tabby tom with gray-green eyes

Eaglefeather- long-haired dark brown- and black-furred tom with yellow eyes

*Apprentice: Pinepaw

Echoheart- mottled dark gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Gravelpelt- dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Hailstorm- dark gray tom with a white underbelly and blue eyes

Moonshine- white she-cat with silver flecks and pale green eyes

Rayclaw- large orange tabby tom with orange eyes

Rustypelt- long-haired gray-brown tabby tom with amber eyes

*Apprentice: Needlepaw

Sparktail- red-brown she-cat with darker flecks, fluffy tail, and brown eyes

Sparrowtail- brown tabby she-cat with thin black stripes and white underbelly

*Apprentice: Rosepaw

Whispersong- light gray tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Needlepaw- pale silver tabby tom with amber eyes

Pinepaw- dark brown tabby tom with white underbelly and dark orange eyes

Rosepaw- cream-furred she-cat with dark green eyes

Yellowflower- light orange tabby she-cat with white muzzle and green eyes

Queens:

Meadowheart- tortoiseshell and white she-cat (mother of Eaglefeather's kits)

Sagetail- cream-furred she-cat with blue-gray eyes (mother of Bronzepelt's kits: *Cherrykit*- fluffy red she-kit, and *Lilackit*- dark tortoiseshell she-kit)

Elders:

Copperleaf- orange-brown tom with darker brown muzzle and ears

Spruceclaw- dark brown tom with lighter brown underbelly and yellow eyes

Twilightfoot- large black tom with white muzzle, underbelly, and

paws

DayClan

Leader: ***Nettlestar-*** dark gray she-cat with grass-green eyes

Deputy: ***Clayfur-*** dark gray tabby tom with a lighter muzzle and gray eyes

*Apprentice: Waterpaw

Medicine cat: ***Lilyfoot-*** white she-cat with dark gray and light brown tabby patches

*Apprentice: Ferntail

Warriors:

Applefang- red-orange tom with white muzzle and pale green eyes

Caverntooth- long-haired mottled gray and brown tom

Coalpelt- large black tom with yellow eyes

*Apprentice: Olivepaw

Foxfang- dark orange tabby tom with white muzzle and orange eyes

Hawktuft- dark brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Songtail- gray-brown tabby she-cat with white underbelly, muzzle, and paws

Weedfoot- small light brown tabby tom with teal eyes

Apprentices:

Ferntail- small white tom with a red and black tabby tail

Olivepaw- dark gray tom with green eyes

Waterpaw- gray tabby she-cat with teal eyes

Queens:

Frostwhisker- white she-cat with pale blue-gray eyes

Elders:

Patchnose- dark tortoiseshell she-cat

DuskClan

Leader: ***Orangestar-*** ginger- and white-patched tom with orange eyes

Deputy: ***Falconflight-*** mottled light brown and dark brown tabby tom

*Apprentice: Elmpaw

Medicine cat: ***Crystalheart-*** white she-cat with bright blue eyes

Warriors: ***Blizzardclaw-*** large white tom with yellow eyes

*Apprentice: Beepaw

Mushroomcloud- pale brown she-cat with a darker face and tail

Pantherclaw- large black tom with dark amber eyes

*Apprentice: Windpaw

Petalheart- white she-cat with pale orange stripes and teal eyes

Raccoontail- long-haired white tom with dark brown tabby tail and brown ears

*Apprentice: Freezepaw

Snowfall- silver and black tabby she-cat with white muzzle and underbelly

Apprentices:

Beepaw- light orange tabby tom with dark amber eyes

Elmpaw- cream-furred she-cat with faint brown stripes

Freezepaw- white she-cat with gray-blue eyes

Windpaw- white tom with a dark face and tail

Queens:

Gingerfur- dark ginger and white she-cat (mother of Orangestar's kits:

Amberkit- ginger and white she-kit, and Scarletkit- red she-kit)

NightClan

Leader: ***Beechstar-*** pale ginger tabby tom with teal eyes

Deputy: ***Mapleleaf-*** ginger tom with dark orange eyes

*Apprentice: Flowerpaw

Medicine cat: ***Icedapple-*** pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Warriors:

Duckflight- brown tabby tom with lighter flecks, cream muzzle, and green eyes

Goosefur- dark brown tabby tom with white underbelly and dark green eyes

Pebbletail- black- and white-patched she-cat with a fluffy tail

Robintail- black tom with orange patches

Swantail- long-haired white she-cat with a fluffy tail

*Apprentice: Ripplepaw

Apprentices:

Flowerpaw- long-haired cream-furred she-cat with darker muzzle and ears

Ripplepaw- long-haired gray tabby tom with fluffy white chest and a bushy tail

Queens:

Cliffsand- pale ginger she-cat with light blue eyes (mother of Goosefur's kits)

Larksong- small dark brown tabby she-cat with black stripes (mother of *Violetkit*- dark brown and white tabby she-kit, and foster mother of *Shadowkit*- black tom-kit with white paws)

Cats Outside Clans

Bumblefrost- large brown tabby tom with green eyes (formerly of DayClan)

Emberclaw- long-haired red tom with brown eyes (formerly of DayClan)

Flamethorn- orange-brown tabby she-cat (formerly of DayClan)

Rainstar- white she-cat with black patches and blue eyes (formerly of DayClan)

Star That Shines Bright (Star)- silver she-cat with one blue eye and one pale green eye (formerly of the Tribe of Rushing Water)

Prologue

Deep in the forest crouched a scrawny white she-cat with a few small black patches. Her ice-blue eyes stared menacingly through the trees, and her razor-sharp claws flexed in and out in fury.

A low growl rumbled deep in her throat as she recalled the last moon's events. She used to be the strongest, most powerful, most feared cat in all four Clans. Then within one morning everything she'd ever worked toward had been snatched from her. And of course, none of this would have happened if her own daughter hadn't betrayed her and helped the other three Clans attack DayClan. But that wasn't even all! DayClan might have won that battle if her stupid Clan hadn't run away like fox-hearted, mouse-dunged cowards.

Traitorous fools, she thought in disgust.

But her other two kits were loyal. True, they hadn't followed her as she fled from the camp, but she knew they would soon join her. They were the only living cats who were loyal to her. The others who had been loyal to her were now all dead, thanks to the other three Clans.

She scowled. She hated every Clan cat alive! If they thought that driving her from her Clan would stop her, they were wrong, way wrong. If anything, it made her want revenge even more. And she'd finish the revenge she'd started when she was named DayClan's leader; she'd get her revenge on every Clan cat for taking away everything she'd worked for, even DayClan.

And there was nothing that could stop her.

* * *

Hidden in the shadows, far away from the furious white she-cat, were two big black eyes, watching, waiting.

Moments later, they were joined by four more. They stared into the forest menacingly, evil shining in their deep, dark depths. This was going to be *their* new territory, and those many, small, defenseless creatures that stood in their way would feel the wrath of their claws and teeth soon.

The first black creature glanced up at the cold, starless sky and thought, *For now, in weak season of snow and cold, we must rest, and gain strength. Then, when come the warmth, it is time for fight.*

Soon this whole forest would be theirs, to do whatever they wanted with. Theirs.

The creature licked its lips at the thought of the smaller creatures' blood on its paws. It let out a snarl of anticipation, then, followed by the other two, it backed from the bushes and melted into the cold, dark shadows, disappearing into the night.

Chapter 1

A full moon glowed above Hailstorm's head as he sat in the clearing on top of the Pointed Mountain, just below the Lightning Tree. His tail was wrapped over his paws as the chilly near-leaf-fall breeze blew through the assembled cats around him.

This was the second Gathering since the attack on DayClan's camp, after Rainstar had stolen kits from each of the other three Clans to try and take over the entire forest; DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan had allied against DayClan and driven Rainstar out. Her son and daughter, Emberpaw and Flamepaw, hadn't fled with their mother, and Hailstorm eyed them warily as they sat with the DayClan patrol.

Rainstar's third kit, Stormpaw, was dead; Rainstar herself had murdered her. But it was thanks to Stormpaw that the other three Clans had found out what exactly Rainstar's plan was, and thanks to Stormpaw they had been able to attack DayClan's camp and rescue the remaining kits Rainstar hadn't killed. But, really, it was Rayclaw they should thank. Nobody would have trusted Stormpaw if Rayclaw hadn't; Rayclaw had formed a special bond with the young she-cat, and had been devastated beyond relief when he saw her dead body. Hailstorm didn't think that Rayclaw would ever be whole again; he'd been distant and depressed constantly over the last two moons, and, although he was getting better, he wasn't the same lively young tom Hailstorm once knew.

Hailstorm shook away the painful memory and looked up at the Lightning Tree, where the DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan leaders sat: Eveningstar, Orangestar, and Beechstar. No cat sat beside them to represent DayClan.

"Do you think StarClan has told Lilyfoot or Ferntail which cat will become DayClan's next leader yet?" Rayclaw murmured quietly

beside Hailstorm.

Hailstorm sat in thought. Because Rainstar had been driven from DayClan and her deputy, Bristlepine, had died at the battle, DayClan had been left without a leader. At the previous Gathering, Lilyfoot, DayClan's medicine cat, had spoken for her Clan, announcing that StarClan still hadn't shown her a sign about DayClan's new leader.

Did StarClan send a sign yet? Hailstorm wondered. *Or will Lilyfoot have to speak for DayClan again? DayClan can't go on forever without a leader.*

Hailstorm glanced back at the Lightning Tree. Sure enough, Lilyfoot was climbing up its smooth bark and joining the other leaders like she had last time. Only now she had brought a second cat with her, a dark gray DayClan she-cat with green eyes: Nettleberry. Hailstorm blinked in confusion. Soon after the two DayClan cats had joined them, Orangestar, Beechstar, and Eveningstar raised their tails for silence in the clearing.

"Ooh, the Gathering is starting!" Rosepaw squealed to Hailstorm's left. He looked at the cream-furred she-cat with amusement.

"Shh!" Sparrowtail hissed at her apprentice. Rosepaw obeyed, but the glimmer of excitement never left her eyes even as she was scolded.

Rosepaw, Needlepaw, and Pinepaw had been apprenticed about a moon ago, and this was their first Gathering. Sparrowtail was mentor to Rosepaw, Rustypelt was mentor to Needlepaw, and Eaglefeather was mentor to Pinepaw.

Hailstorm twitched his whiskers, then he turned his attention once more to the Lightning Tree. Lilyfoot was leaning forward on the branch she was sitting on. "I have good news!" the DayClan medicine cat yowled. "StarClan has finally spoken! Nettleberry is to be DayClan's next leader!"

Cheering erupted from the DayClan crowd, especially from a small dark gray tom and a gray tabby she-cat, and Hailstorm remembered

seeing Nettleberry help these two young cats escape during the recent battle. *They must be Nettleberry's kits*, Hailstorm realized.

"Nettleberry and I will travel to the Moonfall tomorrow so she can receive her nine lives," Lilyfoot meowed. "But that's all *I* have. Nettleberry, as DayClan's new leader, you can take it from here." Lilyfoot leapt from the Lightning Tree and sat beside her apprentice, Ferntail, within the crowd of medicine cats.

Nettleberry dipped her head. "I'm grateful to be chosen to lead my Clanmates; it is more than I could have ever wished for. I'll do it with pride, and with respect of the other Clans, like DayClan should've in the past."

The other three leaders shared approving glances; Hailstorm could tell that they agreed with StarClan's decision wholeheartedly.

Nettleberry dipped her head at them, then turned to face the clearing again. "And I have named a new deputy to help me bring my Clan back to its former glory; a glory that doesn't involve stealing and killing kits; a glory where DayClan will not be regarded as evil; a glory where all four Clans can be at peace rather than at war, but still have respected boundaries and territories."

Many cats from DuskClan, NightClan, and DawnClan nodded. *This is how it was, and is, supposed to be,* Hailstorm thought. *No evil; no fear; just living our lives as four separate Clans united under StarClan*.

Hailstorm looked across the clearing. Most DayClan cats agreed with their new leader, even some that Hailstorm would have thought would support Rainstar over Nettleberry. But there were a few that stared at their paws as Nettleberry spoke, as if they wanted DayClan's glory to involve power and control over other Clans, as it had when Rainstar was leader; two being Emberpaw and Flamepaw. Would they support their new leader, or continue to defend their mother?

Hailstorm shuddered.

Nettleberry spoke again, and Hailstorm looked up at her. "The new deputy of DayClan is Clayfur."

Clayfur, a gray tabby tom, stepped forward from the crowd, holding his head high. He sat proudly on the roots of the Lightning Tree with the other deputies: Sunfur, Mapleleaf, and Falconflight. Hailstorm stared at him. He seemed decent, not too ambitious and prideful like Bristlepine or Heatpool. Maybe Clayfur, Nettleberry, and Lilyfoot could bring DayClan back up again, properly.

"We should have left with Rainstar," Flamepaw muttered, and Hailstorm overheard her. He angled his ears in her direction. "Our Clan's power is going to softies," she spat quietly.

Emberpaw nodded grimly. "I found mother's scent yesterday while out on a hunting patrol," he murmured, "but it lead way outside our territory, and I couldn't follow it with Foxfang and Clayfur watching."

"That's the first time we've scented her in two moons," Flamepaw meowed. "She's done a good job at concealing herself. But we'll find her one day, and I hope it's soon."

"Yeah, DayClan is no good with Nettleberry leading it," Emberpaw grunted. "Rainstar was going to put right what was wrong; one Clan instead of four."

"Rainstar almost carried through with it too. If it hadn't been for Stormpaw," Flamepaw growled in disgust, "then the three Clans would have surrendered to us!"

Hailstorm shook with anger, trying his best not to turn and claw the two DayClan cats.

Nettleberry spoke up once more, and Hailstorm turned to focus on her again. "DayClan is growing strong again after Rainstar's tyrant ruling. We have worked hard to recover after she was driven from DayClan."

Spruceclaw snorted. "That part about DayClan hasn't changed," the brown elder grunted. "Acting like they did everything, not showing gratefulness to other Clans, not wanting to look weak..."

Twilightfoot nodded and whispered in annoyance, "It's thanks to the

other three Clans that Rainstar is not leading DayClan anymore."

"Waterpaw and Olivepaw," Nettleberry was continuing, "DayClan's newest apprentices and my own kits, are working extra hard to provide for their Clan," she meowed, pride glowing in her eyes. The two young cats Hailstorm had spotted earlier puffed out their chests, noses high in the air as the Clans chanted their names.

"Also," Nettleberry yowled again, "Emberpaw and Flamepaw are now warriors: Emberclaw and Flamethorn."

The Clans quietly chanted the new warriors' names, but Flamethorn and Emberclaw didn't notice. They were still whispering to each other, not even caring that their leader was announcing them as warriors to all the Clans.

Nettleberry stepped back after several heartbeats. "That's all," she meowed, nodding for another leader to speak.

Orangestar blinked, stepped forward, then yowled, "DuskClan is doing fine. Scarletkit and Amberkit are growing stronger, but our loss of Redkit has forever damaged us." He sighed. "We have named four new apprentices in these past two moons, all here tonight: Elmpaw," a cream she-cat with brown stripes raised her chin in pride in the DuskClan crowd, "Beepaw," a yellow tom sat proudly beside her, "Windpaw," a siamese tom with bright blue eyes twitched his ears eagerly, "and Freezepaw," a snowy-white she-cat blinked in embarrassment as her leader finished.

The Clans chanted their names, DuskClan by far the loudest. "Elmpaw! Beepaw! Windpaw! Freezepaw!"

Once the chanting died down, Orangestar continued in a sad tone. "And a quarter-moon ago, one of our elders, Fallingrain, was found dead in his den. Crystalheart believed it to be old age, but we still grieve for his sudden death. We hope StarClan takes care of him, and that he'll watch over his former Clan in the many moons that will come." There was a long pause in which many cats either bowed their heads in respect or gazed up at the stars. Orangestar blinked slowly at Silverpelt, and Hailstorm guessed he was trying to figure out if Fallingrain was among the thick band of stars.

Once the moment of silence was finished, Beechstar stepped forward to speak for his Clan. "NightClan is doing fine. Prey is plentiful, and the cooler air shows that leaf-fall is coming; but we'll be ready." He paused, smiled, and announced, "Also, NightClan has another litter of kits on its way! Congratulations, Cliffsand."

The cats all around the pale ginger she-cat congratulated her with many purrs and smiles. Cliffsand blinked in pride, her tail flicking in happiness and her bright blue eyes twinkling like stars.

"Other than that, NightClan has no new news," Beechstar finished.

Now Eveningstar stepped forward. "Congratulations by the way, Nettleberry, for your new position as leader. DawnClan wishes you luck." He then turned to the cats in the clearing below him. "We have named three new apprentices over the past moon: Rosepaw, Pinepaw, and Needlepaw."

The three young cats looked around proudly. Needlepaw flexed the needle-sharp claws he was named after, silver fur shining in the moonlight. Pinepaw looked nervous, dark brown pelt ruffled. Rosepaw looked excited, and she raised her dark green eyes eagerly to the sky.

Eveningstar smiled at the three apprentices, then yowled, "That's all for DawnClan."

"Then that's the end of the Gathering," Orangestar meowed, and Hailstorm realized the DuskClan leader too was looking happier than he had after any Gathering before, when Rainstar was leading DayClan.

Everyone's happier. Well, almost everyone, Hailstorm thought grimly, glancing at Emberclaw and Flamethorn.

Beechstar nodded a farewell to the other three leaders, then leapt from the Lightning Tree; Orangestar followed, then Eveningstar. Nettleberry came last, meeting Clayfur at the base of the large, dead tree, and nodding at him in approval. Together, the new leader and new deputy of DayClan gathered up their Clan and began to make their way down the rocky slope beneath the light of the full moon.

Hailstorm watched Rosepaw, Needlepaw, and Pinepaw find their mentors, looking disappointed that the Gathering was over.

"Why did our first Gathering have to be so *boring*?" Pinepaw complained.

Eaglefeather looked at his apprentice. "It was boring?"

"Of course it wasn't!" Rosepaw exclaimed. "We got announced as new apprentices in front of all four Clans!"

"Nothing exciting or super important happened though," Pinepaw sighed. "Like when Rainstar was leader." He shivered. "Oh I wish I could see her! Every cat says she is as big as the High-stone and has blue eyes colder than—"

"You want to see Rainstar?" Creekfall growled at his son. "She's the reason Lilackit hardly talked a half-moon ago! She and Cherrykit nearly *died* because of her! Did you want there to be fighting? The only reason the last ones were so important or '*exciting*'," he spat, "was that Rainstar was planning bad things, things against the warrior code and the will of StarClan. You should be glad that nothing like that happened! Don't you want peace in the Clans?" he hissed.

"Yes." Pinepaw lowered his eyes, cowering under his father's angered voice.

Needlepaw stepped forward toward Rustypelt and Creekfall. "*I'm* glad there's no more fighting," he meowed.

Creekfall didn't seem to hear him, but Rustypelt gave his apprentice a nod of approval.

"Let's get going," Eveningstar meowed as he reached them, leading them down the Pointed Mountain.

Hailstorm fell in step with Rayclaw, and Sunfur trotted just beside them.

Suddenly Pinepaw shot past them and bounded down the mountain. "Last cat to the bottom is crow-food!" he chanted.

"Hey, wait!" Rosepaw exclaimed, racing just behind her brother.

Needlepaw sprinted after them, tearing up grass and flinging dust and pebbles in the effort to catch up with his littermates.

"Be careful!" Rustypelt yelled after them.

"We will!" Needlepaw called hastily over his shoulder.

Sunfur shook her head, smiling. "They still act like kits, don't they?"

"And they were apprenticed last moon!" Creekfall sighed, staring after his kits, who were shrinking smaller as they flew down the mountain.

Eveningstar snorted in amusement. "Did you really think they'd act like mature warriors the moment they moved from the nursery?"

Creekfall let out an exasperated breath. "No, but I wish they'd just behave better in front of the other Clans."

"They'll get there," Gravelpelt laughed.

Hailstorm smiled along with his Clanmates as they made their way through the grassland and back into DawnClan territory once more.

For the first time in a while, Hailstorm wasn't worried about DayClan threats, and he didn't feel as if his Clanmates could die at any heartbeat. All was well with the forest; all was peaceful.

But would the peace last?

* * *

"Hey! Sleepy furball! Come on, get up!"

Hailstorm rolled over in his nest. Pinepaw was shaking him awake.

"Come off it, won't you?" Hailstorm muttered grumpily.

"Eaglefeather says we're leaving!" Pinepaw persisted.

"Why?" Hailstorm grunted. He didn't want to leave! He was fine in

his nice, warm, soft, cozy nest...

"We're on the dawn patrol! Come *on*!" Pinepaw shook him with his paws again.

"Alright. Alright, I said!" Hailstorm growled as Pinepaw shook him harder. "I'm getting up! Okay?" Hailstorm slowly rose to his paws, stretching the sleep from his limbs, then watched Pinepaw dash back to Eaglefeather across the camp. He sighed. From being the most troublesome kit in Aspenleaf's litter, Pinepaw now was the most eager, which sometimes made him quite annoying. But Hailstorm couldn't blame him; after all, that was exactly how Hailstorm had felt every day before training when he had been an apprentice. Hailstorm shook his head in amusement, then stretched one more time and exited the den.

Eaglefeather rolled his eyes as he saw Hailstorm approaching. "Oh, here comes lazy bones."

"I went to the Gathering last night; of course I'm tired," Hailstorm retorted, yawning.

"So did I," Pinepaw piped up, puffing out his chest.

Hailstorm rolled his eyes. "So why did Sunfur choose us to go on the dawn patrol and not some cats that weren't at the Gathering last night?" he yawned.

Eaglefeather shrugged. "I think she's planning on putting the cats that didn't go to the Gathering on the hunting patrols; they need more energy for prey-catching. But whatever the reason, we have to listen to her."

"Yeah, she's the deputy!" Pinepaw meowed, looking proud of himself.

Really, mouse-brain? I had no idea! Hailstorm bit back the sharp retort, and instead asked, "Should we get going then?"

"We're waiting for Meadowheart," Eaglefeather told Hailstorm, watching the tortoiseshell and white she-cat, who was talking to Sagetail. Sagetail was smiling happily, while Cherrykit and Lilackit's

eyes shone with excitement. Meadowheart purred, then turned and pranced over to Eaglefeather.

Pinepaw looked between them in confusion.

"So, what's all the excitement?" Hailstorm asked them, whiskers twitching.

Eaglefeather apparently couldn't keep it in any longer, and he blurted out, "Meadowheart is going to have my kits!"

Hailstorm smiled in amusement. "Congratulations," he laughed. "When are they due?"

"Goldheart and Yellowflower said sometime in late leaf-fall," Meadowheart squealed in a most kit-like way.

Hailstorm flicked his ears, smiling.

"Can we *go*?" Pinepaw asked impatiently. Apparently he didn't see the excitement of having kits.

"Yes, yes," Eaglefeather brushed away his apprentice's question then lead the patrol out of camp, Meadowheart at his side. Pinepaw bounced in the ferns and grass, purring in delight as grasshoppers and crickets leapt out of his way. Hailstorm lagged behind a bit, looking up at the aspen and maple trees around him. Some of their leaves were already changing colors; most were green, but some were yellow, and few were orange. Hailstorm sighed. Leaf-fall was on its way. And after that would come leaf-bare. Hailstorm hated leaf-bare, as did pretty much every Clan cat. But there wouldn't be the excitement of new-leaf if there wasn't the hardship of leaf-bare.

"Ooh! Eaglefeather, look!" Pinepaw exclaimed, and Hailstorm saw him standing by the stream up ahead. "There are tracks in the mud!"

Eaglefeather bounded over to his apprentice, Meadowheart just behind him. Hailstorm jogged to reach them, and he saw small footprints in the mud beside the stream.

"Weasel or ferret, I think," Eaglefeather meowed, sniffing the tracks.

He shrugged. "Nothing dangerous."

"But we should hunt it!" Pinepaw protested.

"We're on the *dawn* patrol, not a hunting patrol," Eaglefeather reminded his apprentice.

Pinepaw opened his mouth to argue, but then murmured, "Alright, Eaglefeather."

"Good. Now why don't you lead the way across the stream?"

"Okay!" Pinepaw purred, then turned and trotted upstream to the log-bridge, tail high. Without hesitation he leapt onto the moist bark and raced across.

"Careful!" Eaglefeather scolded.

Pinepaw slowed down immediately, then more cautiously crept across the bark.

Hailstorm followed him. When he reached the other side, he turned to Pinepaw and meowed, "You know, just about four seasons ago— last leaf-fall— I fell into the stream and broke my paw and bruised nearly every part of my body."

Pinepaw widened his eyes. "Really?

Hailstorm nodded gravely, recalling it well in his mind. "I could have died. The stream's no place to mess around; no moving water is. Got that?"

Pinepaw nodded quickly, dark orange eyes round as moons.

"Hailstorm is right. Cats have drowned in rivers," Eaglefeather growled sternly as he joined them on the muddy bank.

Pinepaw looked downcast. "I'll be more careful, I promise."

"Good," Eaglefeather muttered, then turned and padded through the forest and towards the meadow.

Meadowheart followed and Hailstorm heard her murmur, "You should have been more considerate. He's young, and eager to make you proud. You could at least show him some praise."

Eaglefeather sighed. "I know, I'm just worried something will happen to him, and he's my first apprentice. I don't want to mess up."

Meadowheart licked his shoulder. "You're doing fine."

Hailstorm turned and saw Pinepaw dragging his paws behind him, all eagerness gone. Hailstorm fell back to walk with him.

"Come on, you're doing just fine," Hailstorm meowed, watching the young brown tom's paws dragging.

"Eaglefeather doesn't think so," Pinepaw murmured.

"He does. He's worried, that's all. Just listen carefully to him and try your absolute best. You're his first apprentice; make him proud."

"That's what I'm worried about," Pinepaw meowed quietly. "What if I let him down?"

"You won't." Hailstorm didn't know what else to say. He sighed. "Come on; we're falling behind." Hailstorm began jogging, Pinepaw following half-heartedly behind him. Once they'd caught up with Meadowheart and Eaglefeather, they were reaching the meadow; Hailstorm could see it up ahead through the thinning trees.

"Pinepaw," Eaglefeather spoke up. Pinepaw pricked his ears and caught up to his mentor. "Can you remember which Clan territory is beyond the river?"

"Easy!" Pinepaw exclaimed, looking excited to know something his mentor asked. "DayClan!"

"Yes," Eaglefeather nodded. "And what about across the Thunderpath?"

Pinepaw narrowed his eyes. "NightClan?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes, it's NightClan. So where does that leave DuskClan?"

"We don't share a border with DuskClan do we?" Pinepaw asked.

"No," Eaglefeather shook his head.

"That means that they're over there!" Pinepaw pointed with his nose in the direction of DuskClan's territory.

"Good!" Eaglefeather praised him.

Pinepaw beamed.

Hailstorm smiled at Pinepaw, and Pinepaw looked extremely proud of himself.

They turned and followed Eaglefeather and Meadowheart downstream, toward the warm sun, which was now halfway to sunhigh. Hailstorm blinked in the brightness, but was glad that it wasn't hot, like it had been all green-leaf.

"Let's remark the border," Meadowheart suggested, stopping by a willow bush on the riverbank. Eaglefeather nodded, and he and Meadowheart went around the bush to the river's edge.

Pinepaw sniffed the air. "I don't smell DayClan's scent marker," he commented, edging closer to the river.

"That's because the wind is blowing away from us," Hailstorm meowed. "And what's it called when the scent is blowing away from you?"

"Um... downwind?"

"No," Hailstorm shook his head. "It's upwind. Downwind is when the wind is blowing toward *us*."

Pinepaw turned around and faced the breeze. "So does that mean I'm downwind now?"

Hailstorm laughed. "No. In comparison to DayClan, you are still upwind; the breeze is blowing your scent across the river and into

DayClan territory; We're upwind, and DayClan is downwind."

"Oh," Pinepaw sighed. "I'm such a mouse-brain."

"No," Hailstorm laughed. "You're learning. It's okay to make mistakes."

Pinepaw looked like he didn't believe him.

Just then Eaglefeather and came out from behind the willow bush. "Ready?" Eaglefeather asked. Then he added, "We marked it up nice and strong. Just in case some DayClan cats still have ideas."

"The ones that were super loyal to Rainstar," Meadowheart added with a growl.

"Where even *is* Rainstar? Does any cat know?" Pinepaw asked quietly, as if talking too loud would bring Rainstar right to them.

Eaglefeather shrugged. "Nope. But I hope it's far from here."

"Maybe she died," Pinepaw suggested hopefully.

"With more than one life left?" Hailstorm added skeptically. "No, I think she's out there hiding, waiting. What she's waiting for, I couldn't care less, as long as it has nothing to do with DawnClan."

Eaglefeather shook his head and sighed, then looked downstream. "Let's move on to the NightClan border and renew the scent markers along the Thunderpath."

Hailstorm and Meadowheart nodded, and Pinepaw followed. Eaglefeather and Meadowheart were concentrated on the patrol, sniffing the ground in front of them as they walked. Pinepaw was lagging behind a bit, gazing in concentration across the DayClan border and at the grassy moor.

Then Pinepaw stopped, pricking his ears and looking behind him. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in worry as Pinepaw's tail bushed up to twice its normal size.

"Eaglefeather?" Pinepaw called, tail lashing.

Eaglefeather and Meadowheart stopped and turned around. "What is it?" Eaglefeather asked worriedly.

"DayClan cats can't cross the river, can they? It's our territory, not theirs, right?"

"No, they can't," Eaglefeather meowed slowly, flicking his ears. "Why?"

"Because there are DayClan cats crossing the stepping stones."

Hailstorm turned around and gazed upstream. Four cats were crossing the river along the stepping-stones. Hailstorm's fur bristled. Then he saw the mottled dark gray and tan tabby pelt, illuminated by the sunlight. His heart skipped a beat.

That wasn't a DayClan cat! Hailstorm gasped. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Chapter 2

Echoheart stood beside Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and Star that Shines Bright, looking across the river. Echoheart's heart fluttered in her chest. Just across the river was DawnClan territory! She could see the forest ahead of them; the green and yellow trees stood tall, leaves and pine needles rustling in the breeze. It was just as Echoheart remembered. They were nearly home!

The journey from the mountains had taken them nearly two moons, and along the way, she, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost had begun teaching Star basic battle moves, parts of the warrior code, and how to hunt in forest terrain.

This morning they'd reached DayClan territory, which had been difficult to go through without being spotted. They had to walk along the Thunderpath to mask their scent. Star had been absolutely terrified when she saw the hard black surface with the monsters racing past; it was the first time she'd seen one, since they didn't travel back through the Twolegplace like they had on their journey to the mountains; they'd taken a different, safer, although longer, path.

"I smell scents like yours," Star commented, looking around at the river. "It smells like both of you," she nodded at Echoheart and Whispersong, then Bumblefrost.

"Well, that's because Whispersong and I are from DawnClan, and Bumblefrost is from DayClan. You can smell both of the Clans' scent markers here; it's the border between the territories," Echoheart meowed. She sniffed DawnClan's scent, and memories flooded back to her. Her heart leapt again. She was so close to home!

Star sighed. "It's nice here, but... I miss home."

"You'll get used to it," Whispersong meowed comfortingly.

"What if your Clan doesn't like me? Or accept me? Will I have to be

a loner? Or..." she gulped, "a *kittypet*? I don't want to live with those Twolegs!"

"DawnClan will accept you," Echoheart meowed determinedly. *They'd better*.

"You're not the only one worried," Bumblefrost murmured, his thick black tail twitching. "I used to be in DayClan; but I don't want to go back. They wouldn't be able to trust me anyway because I left with two DawnClan cats and deserted my Clan. And DawnClan probably won't want me because I was a DayClan cat." He sighed. "I don't belong anywhere."

"You *do*." Whispersong licked Bumblefrost's cheek.

"Sounds harsh," Star murmured nervously, staring at her paws.

"You two *will* be accepted by DawnClan. I'll make sure of it," Echoheart meowed in determination. "I'll make them see." Even Bumblefrost. He was growing on her; he'd saved her life twice on the journey to the mountains and had stood by them loyally the entire time. He'd always had her back even when he didn't truly like her. He was a good cat.

Star look up and blinked at her, her one pale green eye and one light blue eye shining warmly. "Thanks," she smiled weakly. Echoheart smiled back.

"Let's go!" Whispersong urged them, prancing on the spot as she watched the river flow by in front of them. Whispersong flicked her tail at Echoheart to go first.
Echoheart's stomach did an excited flip. She sprang off the muddy bank and onto the first stepping stone. The current lapped at her paws, then she jumped to the next one, hearing Whispersong behind her. When she leapt from the last stone, landing on DawnClan territory, her excitement spilled over. "We made it!" she squealed, prancing on the spot and lifting her tail high. They'd actually made it! They were finally home, on DawnClan territory again! After all those moons away from the Clans, they were finally back where they truly belonged! They were home at last!

Whispersong joined her a heartbeat later, racing in circles around Echoheart in the yellow and brown grass. "I can't believe it! We're home!"

Bumblefrost laughed as he joined them, batting playfully at Whispersong. Star smiled as she jumped to the grassy bank, tail swishing.

Echoheart purred loudly, paws kneading the ground and eyes closing in happiness. She looked up at the sky. *Thank you, StarClan, for guiding us back home!*

"Who are they?" Star meowed suddenly and nervously, looking at the silhouette of four cats running toward them. The sunlight shone from behind the four cats, making them all silhouettes, so Echoheart couldn't tell who they were. Echoheart's stomach plummeted. Were they being attacked? Or were they DawnClan cats? Echoheart was about to let out a warning hiss, but she began to see the colors of their pelts: white and tortoiseshell, black and dark brown, dark brown tabby, and gray- and white-patched. The gray and white pelt stood out to her.

She widened her eyes.

"Echoheart!" The gray- and white-furred tom-cat raced forward, calling her name. His blue eyes shone brighter than the sky above them, and Echoheart let out a gasp as he came closer. Her heart soared.

Hailstorm bowled her over, licking her fur. "Oh, great spirits of StarClan above! I..." He trailed off and let her go, shocked. "I thought I'd never see you again!" Tears of happiness welled up in his eyes, and he licked her again. "Oh, Echoheart, I've missed you so much! I... I don't even know what to say! Oh, you're *home*! Or is this only a dream?"

Echoheart could barely speak. She opened her mouth, and she managed to get out, "I'm... I'm sorry."

"*Sorry*?" Hailstorm choked in disbelief. "You're home! Oh, Echoheart, Echoheart..."

"I... I left you. I left you without telling you. I..."

Hailstorm rubbed his head on her shoulder, murmuring that he forgave her.

"Did... did Goldheart tell the Clan why... why we left?" Echoheart asked quietly.

Hailstorm blinked. "Yes. Did StarClan really send you?"

Echoheart nodded.

"And did StarClan send *them*?" a voice asked. Echoheart looked around Hailstorm, seeing for the first time who the other cats were. Eaglefeather, Meadowheart, and... was that *Pinekit*? Echoheart blinked, then turned toward the cat who'd asked the question. Eaglefeather was glaring at Bumblefrost, and eyeing Star with suspicion, and he asked again, "Did StarClan send them?"

Whispersong stepped away from Meadowheart, whom she'd been greeting. "Oh, well that's a long story. We'll tell the whole Clan."

"How do we know he hasn't been spying?" Eaglefeather growled, glaring at Bumblefrost.

Bumblefrost lashed his tail.

"Spying?" Whispersong exclaimed. "Spying on us while in the mountains?" She shared a look of disbelief with Echoheart, as if she thought Eaglefeather's question was completely mouse-brained. "Oh, yeah, because that's logical. DayClan sent one of their warriors to spy on two DawnClan cats heading for the *mountains*."

Eaglefeather narrowed his eyes in confusion at Whispersong, as if he couldn't believe she was talking to him like that.

Pinekit bounced forward. "You're Echoheart and Whispersong, aren't you?" he asked. "I've heard a lot about you."

Echoheart looked at the young tom. He'd grown so much! "Yes, I'm Echoheart, and that's Whispersong."

"I'm an apprentice!" he purred. "Pine*paw*! And Needlepaw and Rosepaw are apprentices with me!"

Echoheart widened her eyes. Had they really been gone that long?

"So, why are these two with you?" Eaglefeather persisted, tail flicking in annoyance.

"We'll explain to the Clan," Whispersong replied, shuffling closer to Bumblefrost.

Eaglefeather had picked up the tiniest detail. He glared at Bumblefrost. "So Songtail was right! You *are* a traitor!" he exclaimed to Bumblefrost as he saw him and Whispersong closer together.

"Songatil said that I was a traitor?" Bumblefrost growled.

Meadowheart nodded, looking wary but curious of Bumblefrost. "She said she'd chase you off if you ever came back to DayClan." Bumblefrost snarled, "Well I don't want to go back anyway."

"Then where will you go?" Eaglefeather narrowed his eyes.

"We need to get back to camp," Echoheart intervened. "Just let Bumblefrost and Star come with us."

"*Star*? What kind of StarClan-shortened name is that?" Eaglefeather looked confused, turning to Star. "And what happened to your eyes?"

Star narrowed her eyes. "I was born like that," she retorted. "And, in case you didn't know, I used to live in the mountains. Mountain cats name their kits differently than you do. Not all cats live the same way as you do." Echoheart froze at her retort to the large brown and black warrior, and she was afraid he'd attack her. Eaglefeather and Meadowheart exchanged glances, but didn't move.

"Let's go," Hailstorm urged the patrol, then lead the way back into the trees. Echoheart jogged to catch up and fell in step with him.

"So what happened while we were gone?" she asked, remembering Whispersong's first dream about herbs on the way to the mountains,

and hers and Whispersong's same dreams while in the mountains. Both had predicted that bad things were happening in the Clans at the time.

Hailstorm sighed. "Well, there were two battles with DayClan."

"There were?" Echoheart exclaimed in shock, tail lashing. *That was probably what the dreams were about!* "Were they... were they bad?" she asked in a low whisper.

Hailstorm nodded. "First, well, I guess I should start with the beginning." He sighed. "Okay, Rainstar had four kits."

"What! She did?"

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes, the four of them snuck out of camp one day and ended up on NightClan territory."

Echoheart widened her eyes. That was a long way for a kit to walk!

"NightClan found them, and one ran straight onto the Thunderpath and was killed by a monster. Her name was Lightningkit. Rainstar found her kits there, and, seeing Lightningkit, she threatened NightClan and vowed that they'd pay; that was the most furious I've ever seen Rainstar. Well, she attacked NightClan's camp in revenge, and DayClan was fighting to kill. NightClan cats came to ask us for help as well as DuskClan, and we went into battle in the middle of the night. We won, but many NightClan cats were dead, including Bushtail and Brownear. Heatpool, Cougarfang, and Burningwood died from DayClan. None from DuskClan. But," Hailstorm choked, voice faltering. "Twigfoot... Twigfoot died at that battle."

"Twigfoot? D-Dead?" Echoheart exclaimed, heart plummeting. *No! Oh StarClan, why?* She couldn't believe her ears, wouldn't!

Hailstorm nodded, eyes shut tight in pain.

Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and Star had been listening too, and Bumblefrost looked appalled at what his Clan had done.

Hailstorm took a deep breath and continued. "Sunfur is now the deputy." He sighed again. Then after a long pause, he meowed,

"Then what started the buildup to the next battle was when Sagetail woke up and found Cherrykit and Lilackit gone. DayClan had stolen them, along with kits from the other Clans."

"What?" growled Whispersong, lashing her tail.

Hailstorm nodded grimly. "They told us we could get our kits back safely if we agreed to give our territory up to them. NightClan and DuskClan refused, and she killed one kit from each of those Clans as punishment." Hailstorm took a deep breath. "Then she tossed the bodies over the borders for their Clans to find."

Echoheart was disgusted. "She did that?"

Hailstorm nodded grimly. "Before we could meet them and tell them that DawnClan wasn't going to give up its territory, Rayclaw brought back Stormpaw, one of Rainstar's kits," Hailstorm meowed quietly, leaping over a fallen log.

"Ray*claw*?" Whispersong echoed.

"He got his warrior name a while ago. Anyway, Stormpaw had begun disagreeing with her mother and had been meeting Rayclaw in secret to tell him about it. She hated her mother's plans; and once she saw Rainstar killing those kits, she ran away, found Rayclaw, and told all of DawnClan about what Rainstar had done and what she was planning on doing. She helped us formulate a plan, and we raided DayClan's camp the next morning. Stormpaw came into the battle when every cat thought she was back at the DawnClan camp. But she attacked her mother, and... and Rainstar killed her."

"*Killed* her own kit? What kind of mother does that?" Whispersong exclaimed angrily.

Hailstorm shook his head. "I don't know. The good news is that we were able to get every remaining kit out safely, and we drive Rainstar out of DayClan."

"You *drove* Rainstar out?" Bumblefrost echoed in disbelief.

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes. And her deputy died at that battle, so DayClan didn't have a leader for nearly two moons, up until last

night. At the Gathering, Lilyfoot announced that StarClan had told her which cat StarClan had chosen to be the next leader of DayClan: Nettleberry, now Nettle*star*, I bet."

"Nettleberry?" asked Echoheart. She'd never heard that name before.

"She was one of the queens while I was in DayClan," Bumblefrost murmured. "She's nothing like Rainstar, which is good, I suppose. Who'd she choose as her deputy?"

"Clayfur," Hailstorm muttered.

Bumblefrost nodded thoughtfully.

Echoheart swallowed. "Is anyone else d-dead in DawnClan?"

Hailstorm sighed. "Prairiefoot died from an infected badger wound a few moons ago, but other than that, no," he murmured.

Echoheart walked along in silence. She didn't expect to find this news when she returned home. She walked closer to Hailstorm, thanking StarClan he hadn't been one of the cats to die at DayClan's claws. She shuddered. She'd never see Twigfoot or Prairiefoot again; and she'd *left* them. She hadn't been able to defend them, like she'd vowed at her warrior's ceremony. They'd died knowing she deserted her Clan. Echoheart felt a horrible knot of guilt tightening in her stomach.

Soon they reached the stream; Echoheart would have thought she'd feel excited to see the familiar shape of the water flowing below her, but she felt guilty and awful still about Twigfoot's and Prairiefoot's deaths.

Once they passed the Great Pine, the butterflies began fluttering in her stomach, from both excitement to be home, fear of what every cat would think of Echoheart and Whispersong deserting DawnClan, and worry of what they'd all think of Bumblefrost and Star coming into the camp. She swallowed nervously. She could see the brambles lining the camp entrance now.

Sunfur walked by, Gravelpelt and Sparktail following her. Sparktail glanced at the returning patrol and did a double take. She stumbled

on her paws and froze in her tracks. "E-Echoheart? Whispersong?"

Sunfur and Gravelpelt turned at Sparktail's words. Sunfur widened her eyes and let out a gasp when she saw the returning cats. "Echoheart and Whispersong are back!" she yowled.

DawnClan cats rushed from their dens in shock, then raced to the bramble barrier, mouths agape and eyes wide.

"My kits! Oh thank StarClan you're *safe*! You're home! You're *home*!" Sparktail sprinted up to both of her daughters, covering them with licks.

Echoheart licked her mother in return, heart swelling in happiness. She backed up slightly to let Whispersong greet Sparktail, then she looked around. She saw all of her Clanmates, every single one of them, with smiles on their faces. Clovertail, Sparrowtail, Rustypelt, Goldheart, Yellowflower, Rayclaw, Bronzepelt, Twilightfoot, Rosepaw, Sagetail....

"Echoheart and Whispersong have returned!"

"They made it!"

"I can't believe it!"

"I thought they'd never come back!"

Echoheart shook her head, feeling overwhelmed as her Clanmate's voices echoed loudly throughout the camp.

"Wait, but who are *they*?"

"Is that Bumblefrost? Isn't he a DayClan cat?"

"Songtail did say that he'd gone with Echoheart and Whispersong."

"What's he doing *here*?"

"And who in the name of StarClan is *that*?"

"I've never seen *her* before!"

"Why'd you bring them here?"

Every cat backed away from the four returning cats, arching their backs at Bumblefrost and Star in both fear and anger. The clearing fell silent.

Eveningstar stepped forward, looking older than Echoheart remembered. He looked Echoheart and Whispersong over, then smiled. "Welcome home."

Echoheart blinked, still unable to form words, and dipped her head to her leader.

Creekfall spoke up again, stepping in front of Aspenleaf and their kits as if to shield them from the returning cats. "Who *are* they, and what are they doing *here*?" he demanded.

"Yeah!" growled Sagetail, Aspenleaf, Rustypelt, Moonshine, and Sparktail in unison.

"They don't belong in DawnClan!" added Eaglefeather with a snarl.

Eveningstar silenced the Clan then turned to Echoheart and Whispersong. "I'm sorry your first few moments back are like this, but every cat seems to be demanding information on these two cats." He eyed Star and Bumblefrost. "Why don't you four join me on top of the High-Stone and then you can tell the whole Clan what happened?"

"Alright," Echoheart meowed nervously, dipping her head.

Eveningstar lead the way, and Echoheart and Whispersong motioned for Star and Bumblefrost to follow. Eveningstar sprang from the ground and onto the lichen-covered boulder. Whispersong followed, then Echoheart, then Bumblefrost, and lastly Star.

Cats began gathering at the base of the boulder, looking up at the five cats above them.

Eveningstar nodded to Echoheart and Whispersong. Echoheart shared a glance with her sister, then stepped forward, raising her voice. "Um, it's good to be back," she began, and Sparktail let out a

purr, leaning against Rustypelt in joy. "As Goldheart told you, we left you to go to the mountains, sent by StarClan. StarClan, well... they told us that there were cats that lived up in the mountains, cats who could help us figure out more about the prophesized danger."

"The *prophesized* danger?"

"Danger? What danger?"

"*What* prophecy?"

"What's the prophesized danger?"

Echoheart blinked in shock. *Goldheart didn't tell them that there's a prophecy?* She sighed and looked out over her Clanmates. "Well, there's a prophecy. Whispersong and I both had a dream where a StarClan cat showed us a vision and told us a prophecy." The clearing fell dead silent. "In... in the vision, there was a large, black creature, and it had the largest teeth and claws any cat could imagine. Three times as big as a badger, and five times as viscous. Then a voice spoke to us." She swallowed nervously. "And told us this prophecy: 'Darkness will veil the sky, but with the whispering voice of two, the forest, as one, will echo with light'."

No cat said anything. The silence lasted so long it made Echoheart shift uncomfortably.

Sparrowtail broke the silence, speaking in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "What does it mean?"

Echoheart avoided any cat's eyes. Should she tell her Clan that the prophecy was about her and Whispersong? She opened her mouth, then hesitated.

Whispersong spoke up instead, taking a deep breath, then meowing, "It means that a darkness, a danger, will come upon the forest, and with two cats, two cats chosen by StarClan, the Clans will be united against it."

"So...?" Bronzepelt meowed loudly. "Who are the two cats?"

Echoheart exchanged a glance with Whispersong.

"It's you two, isn't it?" Sparktail whispered.

Echoheart looked down sadly at her mother, then nodded.

"There's a prophecy about you?" Sunfur echoed. "But..." she trailed off, lost for words.

Whispersong nodded too, staring at her paws. "We should have told you, but we needed to leave to the mountains as soon as possible, and we... we were afraid you'd try to stop us from going."

No cat spoke.

Gravelpelt stepped forward. "Then why did Bumblefrost go with you?"

"He wasn't sent by StarClan, was he?" growled Twilightfoot.

Whispersong didn't take her eyes off her paws, and Bumblefrost looked uncomfortable.

"Was Songtail right?" Sparktail spoke up again, looking at Whispersong with disapproval. "Do you *love* him?" Sparktail was no longer purring in joy. She had stiffened, and her reddish fur was bristling. She narrowed her eyes. "WELL?"

Whispersong tensed and narrowed her own eyes. "Yes," she meowed defiantly.

"How could you be so *mouse-brained*?" Rustypelt sputtered, getting to his paws in a heartbeat. His ears were flattened and his tail was lashing as he stood at Sparktail's side. "My daughter, falling for a DayClan cat!"

Whispersong narrowed her eyes, sitting up taller. "He's no longer a DayClan cat. He hates what DayClan's done to the other Clans, and he'd no longer be accepted there if he tried! He is the nicest, most caring cat I've ever met! And if you can't learn not to judge him by his Clan's actions instead of his own, then *you're* the mouse-brain!"

Rustypelt hissed, claws unsheathed and teeth bared. Whispersong glared at her father, watching as he stormed from the Clan meeting

and disappeared inside the warriors' den across the camp. Sparktail took one last look at Whispersong and Echoheart, anger and sadness in her eyes, then she dashed after her mate.

No cat spoke.

Bumblefrost leaned closer to Whispersong. "You didn't have to," he whispered in her ear, fur still bristled.

"I did have to," she sighed. "They need to learn not to judge someone by their birth."

Echoheart watched them sadly. It looked like Bumblefrost wasn't going to be accepted in DayClan *or* DawnClan. She sighed. She had hated Bumblefrost in the beginning, yes, but now she trusted him. All of DawnClan was acting just how Echoheart had started acting around Bumblefrost, so couldn't they learn to trust him like she had?

"Do you want to finish what you were saying about going to the mountains?" Eveningstar meowed awkwardly, looking between Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost, then over the rest of the silenced Clan.

"Sure," Echoheart sighed, sparing Whispersong from having to speak. Echoheart turned to her gathered Clanmates once again and cleared her throat. "Umm..." She took a deep breath. "Once we... once we made it to the mountains, we met a group of mountain cats, called the Tribe of Rushing Water. Star," she nodded at the white Tribe cat, "was a to-be, I mean apprentice, in the Tribe. We stayed there for about a moon."

She paused and glanced at Star. "One day, Star lead us out into her territory and we found the creature: it's called a bear, and it's just as vicious as in mine and Whispersong's dreams." Echoheart shuddered. "And, as StarClan prophesized, it'll be here one day, sooner or later, and the prophecy will be fulfilled."

Cats looked panicked below her, but she continued on. "A few days before we left, the leader of the Tribe told us something strange: Star had been having dreams about different cats who were in

danger, and dreams about different stars and ancestors unlike her own. She was dreaming about the Clans." Every cat stared at one another in disbelief. "So the Tribe leader told us what he thought of her dreams, and he believed that Star was destined to leave her Tribe and journey to the Clans with us. For what reason, no cat knows, but she came back with us, and..." she turned to Eveningstar, "well, I'm asking you if she can stay with us."

Eveningstar looked troubled. "I suppose since she doesn't know much about the Clans she can't use information against us..."

"I... I'm not a threat. I promise," Star insisted shyly.

"So you were an apprentice in your, uh, Tribe?" Eveningstar asked.

Star nodded. "We were called to-bes, but yeah." She shuffled her paws nervously.

"Then you can become an apprentice here. You can sleep with the other apprentices, and I will mentor you myself until I see you're fit to join DawnClan as a full warrior."

Star looked unsure. Echoheart nodded at her in encouragement, then the silver she-cat meowed, "O-Okay. But will I have to change my name like you Clan cats do? Because I'm proud I came from the Tribe of Rushing Water; I'm proud of my past. And... and even though I left, I want to keep the, uh, memory."

Eveningstar blinked, looking slightly confused at Star's request. "No, I guess we can make an exception. But you'll have to sleep and train with the other apprentices."

Star nodded, still looking nervous about Eveningstar speaking to her. "I will."

"Eveningstar?" Whispersong spoke up timidly. "What about Bumblefrost? Shouldn't he be able to join DawnClan if Star is?"

Eveningstar sighed, looking at Bumblefrost with narrowed eyes. "He can stay here, for now, I guess. But he needs to prove he isn't loyal to DayClan anymore before he can join DawnClan—"

"Which won't happen," Echoheart heard some cat mutter, but she couldn't see who.

The cats in the clearing muttered to themselves, seeming to not approve of a DayClan cat staying in the DawnClan camp.

"But keeping him here will be better than having him roaming the forest; we'll be able to watch him better here and make sure he doesn't go running back to DayClan with his secrets. I'm sure he learned a lot from Whispersong on their journey," Bronzepelt muttered with a snarl, and some cats nodded in agreement.

Echoheart flattened her ears at her former mentor's comment; she could understand his and every other cat's mistrust of Bumblefrost, because she had once been there, but couldn't they at least see that he couldn't possibly be that bad if Echoheart and Whispersong let him go on their journey with them?

"He can sleep in the apprentices' den too until he can prove that what you say about him, Whispersong, is true. But remember, both him and Star have to prove their loyalty, and will be watched, especially Bumblefrost, so that he doesn't cause any harm to DawnClan. Being a DayClan cat, he has a bad reputation already, so he'd better not go ruining it for himself," Eveningstar finished, narrowing his eyes and looking at Echoheart and Whispersong intently, not even making eye contact with Bumblefrost.

Bumblefrost looked about ready to retort, but held it back and muttered, "I...I'll prove that I can be loyal to DawnClan. DayClan is no longer my Clan. I have no respect left for them."

Chapter 3

Whispersong opened her eyes, expecting to see Bumblefrost, Echoheart, and Star beside her. But she was in the warriors' den, with her DawnClan Clanmates around her.

Several days had passed since they'd returned home, and they had been spent resting, eating, and renewing their energy after the long journey from the mountains. Whispersong recalled that day with a yawn. They were home; they were finally home. But now her Clan knew she and Echoheart were part of a prophecy. What if their Clanmates expected too much of them? What if they let them down? What if they failed? What if she failed? Whispersong shook her head. No. They couldn't. Wouldn't. She had to believe in StarClan's faith in her and Echoheart.

Whispersong sighed. The Clans were relying on her, a cat that was sticking up for a DayClan warrior even after everything Rainstar and her warriors had done. DawnClan already knew that Whispersong loved Bumblefrost, knew that she'd stick up for him, even if his loyalty could never truly lie with DawnClan. Whispersong sighed again. But what would the other Clans think when they found out about her and Bumblefrost? Would they trust her enough when the time came to fulfill the prophecy? Surely they would agree with what Rustypelt had said about it the other day, wouldn't they?

Whispersong's heart sank as she remembered the argument she and Rustypelt had had a few days ago; she knew lots of cats agreed with her father, and would act like Echoheart had when she'd first found out, but couldn't they learn to trust Bumblefrost like Echoheart eventually had? Like DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan had with Stormpaw? If they could learn to find trust in a young DayClan apprentice, the daughter of *Rainstar*, they could find trust in just an ordinary DayClan warrior, couldn't they? After all, Bumblefrost had stayed by Echoheart's and Whispersong's sides the whole time they were on the journey, and he'd learned to trust Echoheart too. He

could be loyal to DawnClan!

Whispersong scanned the dimly-lit den. To her relief, her father was nowhere to be seen, nor was her mother; she hadn't come across them since the day they'd returned.

Whispersong stood up and stretched, then crept over the sleeping warriors and out into the clearing. She saw Bumblefrost and Star, sitting in the corner of the camp away from everyone else. Star looked frightened, but Bumblefrost looked angry. He was hunched over, glaring at Pinepaw, Needlepaw, and Rosepaw.

With a feeling of foreboding, Whispersong jogged over to him. "What is it?" she hissed in his ear. "Did you sleep well?"

"Those three nuisances," he scowled at Needlepaw, Rosepaw, and Pinepaw, "told us that DawnClan didn't need scum like us. They made us sleep next to the entrance, took our moss, and said that the only use we'd be were useless lumps of fur. They said that we don't belong here and that we never will." The anger faded from Bumblefrost's face and was replaced by sadness. He turned to Whispersong. "You said DawnClan would accept me."

"I never said it would be easy," Whispersong sighed, her heart throbbing painfully for him. "But if you start proving that you can be loyal to DawnClan, they'll accept you."

"I doubt it," Bumblefrost growled. "You see how long it took Echoheart? Well, imagine getting a whole Clan, all like Echoheart was, to trust me! It'll never happen. And I don't want to be loyal to rude flea-brains like them. Why would I? If they treat me bad of course I won't be loyal back to them!"

Whispersong silently agreed with him, and, in her sadness and love for him, in her longing for his happiness, she meowed, "Look, you... you can try and go back to DayClan, if it'll make you happier. R-Rainstar isn't there anymore..."

"What? Are you insane? I'm never going back!" Bumblefrost spat, then his eyes softened. "I want to be wherever you are, but... I can't go on like this, Whispersong! I just wish we were back on the

journey again: no cats judging us, no separate Clans, just us being who we wanted to be!" He stared at his paws.

Whispersong's heart ached for him. "What do you want to do then?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know," he sighed.

"Why don't you try it longer?" she pleaded. "They might change. They saw that you were loyal to Echoheart and I. They'll eventually see! Please, Bumblefrost, stay."

Bumblefrost sighed. "I'll stay for now, but how am I supposed to continue living as a Clan cat if I can't stay here? DayClan definitely doesn't want me; no other Clan will either!" He let out an unsteady breath.

Whispersong sighed, shoulders sagging. "Just give them time."

Bumblefrost snorted.

Whispersong watched Eveningstar and Sunfur, who were making their way over to her and Bumblefrost.

"Bumblefrost," Eveningstar meowed. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," Bumblefrost replied stiffly.

Eveningstar blinked, then cleared his throat. "Today, I'd like you to join Sunfur's hunting patrol so you can get used to DawnClan hunting and some of the warriors."

"What's the point?" Bumblefrost growled. "Your warriors hate me. And I already know how to hunt in the forest. Whispersong and Echoheart taught me on our journey to the mountains," he added stiffly.

"If you ever want to sleep here again, I suggest you don't talk to the leader like that," Sunfur snapped. "If I was leader, you would not even be setting paw in DawnClan's camp; so you're lucky Eveningstar is even considering you and giving you a chance!"

Bumblefrost narrowed his eyes.

Eveningstar spoke again. "Are you going to join Sunfur's hunting patrol or not?"

"Fine," Bumblefrost grunted.

Eveningstar gave a stiff nod, then turned to Whispersong. "You can join the other. I know it's hard to get used to the duties again since you've been gone for a whole season, maybe longer, but we need cats."

Whispersong nodded. "Can't I join Bumblefrost's?"

"No, not today." Eveningstar shook his head. "Also, I'd like you to go see Goldheart and Yellowflower to check if you're doing fine after that long journey. Bumblefrost can go with you."

"What about Echoheart and Star?" Whispersong asked.

"Echoheart already checked in with the medicine cats this morning before she left on the dawn patrol. Star can be checked after you." Eveningstar then turned to Star. "Speaking of, after you see Goldheart and Yellowflower, I'll take you to your first apprentice training."

Star didn't look as excited as Clan-born apprentices did before training, but she nodded respectfully at the DawnClan leader anyway.

Whispersong nudged Bumblefrost, then led him across the camp to the ivy-draped medicine cat den. Whispersong slipped inside, Bumblefrost beside her. Goldheart and Yellowflower were nudging herbs into a tight, moist crevice, probably trying to preserve the herbs as leaf-fall approached.

Yellowflower turned and her green eyes filled with excitement. "Oh, Whispersong, I haven't seen you in so long!" she purred.

Whispersong smiled warmly. "It's been a while. I missed you."

"I missed you too! I'm so glad StarClan brought you back safely."

Yellowflower flicked her tail. "I saw Echoheart earlier. She told me about the journey. I can't believe that new silver she-cat was a mountain cat. Why'd she come back with you?"

"Well, her own ancestors sent her dreams about the Clans," Whispersong murmured, and Goldheart twitched his ears in interest as he sorted herbs.

"Ooh," Yellowflower looked very intrigued. "She has warrior ancestors too? Are you sure it's not StarClan?"

"It's not. She said their ancestors' fur has a silver sheen like ice, not starlight."

Yellowflower curled her tail in curiosity, and meowed eagerly, "I must talk to her about them." She turned to Goldheart. "Do you think her ancestors would come to us in a dream?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, why would her ancestors send her here? What do they care about the Clans?" Goldheart shook his head and turned back to his herbs.

"The Tribe's ancestors sent Echoheart a sign; a pair of eyes," Whispersong meowed. "I don't know why, but Star is somehow involved in this if *her* ancestors are sending signs to us Clan cats about *StarClan's* prophecy."

Bumblefrost spoke up for the first time. "Star also had dreams about the bear, like Whispersong and Echoheart did."

"Really?" Yellowflower exclaimed.

"Bear?" Goldheart echoed.

"It's the name of the creature StarClan prophesized," Whispersong murmured, shivering.

Goldheart blinked. "Did you have any more dreams? Like you told us before you left?"

Whispersong shook her head. "I wish I'd have another dream. We don't know anything more than the name of the creature and

vaguely about Star's destiny here. It's so hard."

"I had a dream," Goldheart murmured, as if to himself. A shadow seemed to cross his eyes, and he stiffened as if in a trance. "Darkness coming. All darkness."

Yellowflower looked at her mentor in shock. "When did you have this dream?"

"At... at the Moonfall."

Whispersong sat still as stone. StarClan was warning Goldheart of a coming darkness? Could the danger already be on its way? Whispersong shuddered, then she turned and looked at Bumblefrost. His eyes had darkened, as if he was thinking the same thing as her.

Yellowflower noticed their looks. "Do you think it's the *danger* you're dreaming about, Goldheart? The *bear* that Echoheart told us about?"

"We'll just have to see... maybe StarClan will... oh, I don't know." Goldheart shook his orange tabby head dismissively, and the shadow over his eyes was gone. "Okay, let's get you two checked."

Whispersong stepped forward as Yellowflower looked her over. "You sure seem to have gained a lot more muscle," Yellowflower meowed. "A few cuts and bruises, but I think you're fine."

"Yes, you seem in good condition as well, Bumblefrost," Goldheart muttered.

"Why did Eveningstar even send you two in here? You're both fine," Yellowflower meowed.

"I think he wanted to make sure we were ready to get back to warrior duties, since we've been without medicine cat knowledge for a while."

Yellowflower blinked and flicked her tail. "You're fine."

Goldheart was barely paying attention anymore. He was staring at

the den wall again. His orange eyes were distant and foggy, as if he saw something Whispersong didn't.

"You're both good to go," Yellowflower murmured distractedly, staring at her mentor in concern.

Whispersong dipped her head, still watching Goldheart, and motioned for Bumblefrost to follow her. They exited the stone den side by side and headed for the clearing.

"What was with Goldheart?" Bumblefrost whispered. "He was acting like he was seeing something; hallucinating. Or is he just getting old?"

"He's not that old," Whispersong murmured. "Maybe he was thinking about that dream of his. About the darkness. But he does seem to be acting differently than before we left for the mountains."

"He seemed odd," Bumblefrost stated flatly.

"There you two are," Sunfur sighed, sitting beside Bronzepelt, Eaglefeather, and Pinepaw. "Finally."

Bumblefrost let out an annoyed breath.

"Whispersong, Rayclaw is leading the other hunting patrol you're joining. They're waiting outside the camp," Sunfur meowed.

Whispersong nodded to the deputy, then turned to Bumblefrost and whispered, "Just listen to her, alright? Please, just try. I'll see you later." She briefly touched her nose to his, aware of her Clanmates watching her. Then she turned and trotted to the camp entrance without a backward glance.

Suddenly she felt empty. Yes, she was home, something she'd been dreaming of since they'd left, but she wasn't with Echoheart or Bumblefrost right now, the two cats she trusted most, like she had been for the past few moons. She felt alone.

"There you are!" exclaimed a voice ahead of her.

Whispersong looked up. Rayclaw sat in front of her, Gravelpelt and

Aspenleaf next to him. Whispersong blinked rapidly. Rayclaw was huge! She hadn't been able to see him since they'd returned, and he sure wasn't the young, small apprentice she'd known before they had left. He now had broad shoulders and huge paws, and he was easily one of the biggest toms in DawnClan, even bigger than his father, Bronzepelt.

"Oh, uh, hi Rayclaw. You... grew," she laughed.

Rayclaw smirked, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"You have, too," Gravelpelt purred.

Whispersong stared at her former mentor, her heart warming. "Oh, Gravelpelt; I haven't seen you in so long!"

"I guess my training helped you after all," he chuckled. "You made it back not only alive and successful, but wiser and stronger."

Whispersong smiled. "That's what Yellowflower said. I guess I have got more muscle than I used to."

Aspenleaf smiled and nodded.

There was silence in which Whispersong stared warmly at her three Clanmates in front of her. It felt good to be back with them, though a bit strange too.

"Shall we go?" Rayclaw asked, staring at the forest behind him. "The prey won't hunt itself."

"Yes, yes, let's go," Gravelpelt meowed.

The four warriors turned away from the camp and headed through the leaf-fall forest. Whispersong took a deep breath of the fresh forest air, her heart swelling with warmth. She was back, truly back.

"Feels good to be home doesn't it?" Aspenleaf asked, trotting beside her.

Whispersong smiled and nodded. "Yes," she purred. "But, it's just..."

she sighed and paused for several heartbeats. Then she asked, "You ended up trusting Stormpaw, right?"

Aspenleaf looked taken aback at the sudden subject change, but nodded. "We had to. Sagetail's kits, and other Clans' kits, were going to die if we didn't. It was thanks to Rayclaw we did. He believed in her when no other cat did."

Whispersong blinked in sadness. It sounded like her and Bumblefrost; no cat had faith in him except her. Whispersong opened her mouth, but Aspenleaf spoke first.

"I know where you're going with this, Whispersong," she sighed.

"Well then why can't any cat trust Bumblefrost?" she exclaimed. "Can't you see he stood by Echoheart and I our entire journey? He's loyal!"

"He doesn't act like he wants to be," Aspenleaf sighed. "I've watched him these past few days. Stormpaw... well Stormpaw wanted to help because her Clan was becoming corrupted and she didn't believe it to be right, and-"

"That's how Bumblefrost was when I first met him! He didn't agree with Rainstar, his mentor, or even his own sister!"

"He'll have to prove it."

"Why is every cat so stubborn? You-"

"We're not being stubborn, Whispersong. No, listen. The Clan is just being logical. We can't just take in every cat brought to us. We'd fall apart. We need to know we can trust each and every one of our Clanmates, with our lives." Aspenleaf sighed. "We're held up by this trust and loyalty; it's a complicated web. Each strand relies on another to hold the whole web up. But one betrayal, one lie, and the whole web will fall. Each strand a lie touched will break, and the trust of the entire web could fall apart. Bumblefrost may be spinning his own web of trust into ours, maybe unknowingly. We may entwine our trust with his eventually, only to find that it wasn't strong enough to hold the Clan up." Aspenleaf sighed again,

her pale green eyes boring into Whispersong's. "His loyalty might not be strong enough, Whispersong. His misperceived trust might break DawnClan's web."

Whispersong shook her head in disbelief and stammered, "H-How could he... how could he possibly do that?"

"Webs are fragile, and trust is fragile. You'd be surprised at how much damage one lie can do to something like that."

* * *

Whispersong sat still, staring absently at the mulch and dying plants beneath her paws. Her mind was still on the patrol; Aspenleaf's words still haunted her.

There's no way Bumblefrost could cause that much damage! DawnClan's just being stupid right now.

She scowled. Bumblefrost was probably being bullied by Sunfur and her hunting patrol, and all he wanted was to be accepted. She let out a breath of anger. They'd all trusted Stormpaw! *Rainstar's* daughter! And even though Bumblefrost had the same views Stormpaw had, DawnClan refused to trust him.

True, it'd only been a few days since they'd returned from the mountains, but they'd trusted Stormpaw in one day! Whispersong sighed, now feeling more sad than angry. How could she live if Bumblefrost was rejected by DawnClan and told to live as a loner?

I'd go with him, she thought.

But would she really leave her Clan for Bumblefrost?

Yes.

But how could she? Echoheart needed her, and she needed Echoheart. And the Clans were relying on both of them, even if not all the Clans knew it yet. The danger was going to be coming; how could the prophecy be fulfilled if Whispersong left?

Whispersong felt her heart being torn between DawnClan and

Bumblefrost again, like it had before they had left for the mountains. She needed Bumblefrost, but she needed Echoheart just as much.

Suddenly Whispersong felt a squirm in her stomach. She blinked in confusion, then sighed. The nerves were getting to her. There was so much going on she didn't know what to do anymore: Bumblefrost was trying to join DawnClan, Star was training as a Clan apprentice, the danger was coming, the prophecy was looming over them... Too much stress.

Whispersong sighed, staring blankly around her.

Then she heard something. She looked up. There was a commotion by the camp entrance. Whispersong angled her ears forward, heart thumping.

It was the dawn patrol. Echoheart, Sagetail, Rustypelt, and Moonshine trotted back into the camp, looking angered, fur bristled and ears flattened. Whispersong craned her neck to see them better, her stomach churning with worry.

They slowed to a stop, eyes filled with a burning flame. Whispersong stared at Echoheart, who was looking especially angered and fearful.

"What is it?" cats began to ask as the patrol caught their breath.

Eveningstar and Gravelpelt pushed their way forward, Goldheart behind them. "What happened?" Gravelpelt asked in worry.

Bronzepelt panted. "We... we scented Rainstar."

"Rainstar?"

"What?"

"*Here*?"

"In DawnClan territory?"

"But we drove her out!"

Murmurs flew across the gathered cats like a cold wind, and Whispersong felt her stomach lurch. *Rainstar?* Whispersong shook her head. Rainstar was supposed to be gone, driven from DayClan, banished, disappeared...

"You actually smelled her?" Creekfall asked in shock.

Echoheart nodded grimly.

"Where?" Eveningstar demanded.

"By the far side of our territory," Sagetail muttered, still breathing heavily. "That way." She pointed with her nose in the direction that the sun set; toward the DawnClan border not shared with another Clan.

"What's she doing over there?" Sparrowtail asked quietly. "You'd think she'd be by the DayClan border, not ours."

Moonshine scowled and shook her head, still panting.

"Did you check it out?" Eveningstar asked the patrol.

"Yes, we followed her scent, but it led us outside our territory, and we thought we'd report it as soon as possible to the Clan instead of following it and possibly meeting Rainstar on the way," Rustypelt meowed.

"We also scented Emberclaw and Flamethorn," Rustypelt added, ears flattened.

Whispersong bristled. She knew Flamethorn and Emberclaw were Rainstar's two remaining kits, but she'd never seen them before. She shivered. She did *not* like the fact that three former DayClan cats were wandering around by DawnClan's borders. She shivered.

Moonshine shook her head. "I don't think they've been here long though."

"Good," Rayclaw growled.

Every cat nodded, looking angry and fearful.

"We should add extra scent-markers to that border, to show that we've noticed her," Copperleaf added in behind Eveningstar.

The DawnClan leader nodded at the elder. "Good idea. I'll have to tell the evening patrol that goes out tonight to do that."

There was a silence.

"Will Rainstar try and kidnap kits again?"

Every cat turned at the small voice. Lilackit and Cherrykit sat pressed against one another beside Aspenleaf, looking terrified. "What if she tries to kill us like she killed Darkkit and Redkit?" Cherrykit whispered, trembling. Her red fur was spiked beside the tortoiseshell fur of Lilackit's, and both small cats had eyes round as the moon.

Sagetail looked at her kits in sadness. "We will make sure that every kit, and every cat, is safe from Rainstar, I promise. She will not do any more damage to you; she will not do any more damage to DawnClan."

Whispersong blinked, stomach sinking and heart pounding. She wasn't sure about that. It seemed like Rainstar always found a way to harm the other Clans.

And Whispersong had a feeling she'd do it again.

Chapter 4

Whispersong was lying beside Bumblefrost in the meadow, next to the river. The warm sun shone down on them, and Whispersong purred, closing her eyes.

Suddenly the warmth was gone from her pelt. Whispersong blinked opened her eyes.

Bumblefrost was getting to his paws, staring at her in a way very unlike him. Her heart skipped a beat. His usually-pale-green eyes were now black, soulless gaps. He hissed.

Whispersong yelled out, squeezing her eyes shut tight.

Her eyes flew open. It was dark around her. Her heart was pounding in fear, but she realized she was in the warriors' den, safely in DawnClan.

"Whispersong?"

Whispersong couldn't speak. Relief washed over her. It had been a dream. Only a dream. Her heart still pounded against her ribs, and her uncontrolled breathing was still uneven.

"Whispersong?" Whispersong turned. Sparrowtail was staring at her. "Are... are you alright?" she whispered.

Whispersong nodded weakly, still not able to form words.

"Do you want to take a walk with me?"

Whispersong slowly nodded, mind blank.

Sparrowtail got to her paws and wove around the sleeping cats around them. Echoheart raised her head, and Rayclaw stirred, but none of them questioned Sparrowtail or Whispersong.

Whispersong squeezed out of the den after Sparrowtail, the cold

night air piercing her body. She let out a breath of shock, watching it swirl like fog in front of her.

"Let's go to the sunning-stones."

Whispersong nodded.

Sparrowtail sat down beside the silver rocks, staring sympathetically at Whispersong. Whispersong sat across from her. The grass was covered in frost, and it froze her paws, but she didn't notice it. Her mind was throbbing too hard to notice much else.

"What's wrong?"

Whispersong opened her mouth, but not words formulated in her mind.

"Are you okay?" There was silence, and Sparrowtail meowed, "I... I haven't seen you in so long."

"I... I know," Whispersong murmured. "I missed you..." Her meow was ragged, and hardly audible, but Sparrowtail smiled, meaning she'd understood her.

"I've missed you too."

There was another silence.

"So, what is bothering you? You were calling out in your sleep."

"I was?"

Sparrowtail nodded. "It wasn't too loud. I was already awake; but you were starting to wake other cats, so I woke you up."

Whispersong nodded. "I was... I just had a bad dream, I guess."

Sparrowtail blinked, and Whispersong shivered as a cold late-leaf-fall breeze blew past her. Why was she dreaming about Bumblefrost like that? Bumblefrost was certainly nothing like he'd been in her dream. Nothing. So why would she have dreamt about that? He'd never hurt her! Ever!

Maybe she was thinking subconsciously of what Aspenleaf had said about Bumblefrost breaking DawnClan's web of trust. Maybe.

"Do you trust Bumblefrost?" Whispersong asked, staring absently at the grass by Sparrowtail's paws.

"Me?" Sparrowtail asked. "Oh, I..." she sighed. "To be honest: not... not really."

Whispersong didn't answer. Of course Sparrowtail didn't trust him. No cat did. "Why not?"

There was a pause.

"Uh," Sparrowtail meowed hesitantly, "because he's a DayClan cat."

"Was. He's not DayClan anymore. He'd never go back."

"Are you sure though?"

"Of course I'm sure," she snapped.

"But, just say that he—"

"For StarClan's sake, he's not going back to DayClan!" Whispersong interrupted her. "So why can't you at least *try* to trust him? Stormpaw was a DayClan cat, and Rainstar's daughter at that, and look who trusted her! All of DawnClan! So doesn't Bumblefrost deserve the same respect?"

Sparrowtail narrowed her eyes. "He's not acting like he's trustworthy."

"That's because you're not giving him a chance!" she growled. "And what about Star?"

"Star..." Sparrowtail sighed again. "Star is different. Easier to talk to, more polite."

Whispersong growled. "Listen, just try to give Bumblefrost a chance. Just *try*. He wants to be trusted. He doesn't want cats to judge him based on his previous Clan's actions. He wants to be judged for who

he is, for what—"

"Well then maybe he should actually act like the cat you're describing him as."

"Well, maybe you all should open your eyes and see what I'm talking about! All you see when you look at him is DayClan, and Rainstar, but he's not like that! That's where you're all blind! You can't just focus on where he's from; you need to look beyond that—"

"Actions speak louder than words, Whispersong," Sparrowtail growled. "Bumblefrost's actions have shown me more than all your words have told me. I won't change my views about him, and nor will any other cat, until he changes his actions and shows us for himself."

Whispersong opened her mouth in anger, but nothing came out.

Sparrowtail narrowed her eyes. "You know, Whispersong; this will not end well. Things like this never do. You're already losing your parents' trust from this, and I think you'll soon find you're losing others' trust too. You will regret this one day, Whispersong." Then she turned and marched toward the warriors' den once more, brown tabby fur an eerie silver in the starlight.

Whispersong felt hopelessness spread through her like a flood. Sparrowtail was right. She was losing her Clanmates' trust, something she'd never imagined would ever happen to her. Her heart ached with agony. She was losing her closest relationships, including Sparktail and Rustypelt, who'd always been there for her since she was a kit. She'd nearly lost Echoheart, and now Sparrowtail was angry with her; she'd never argued with Sparrowtail, ever.

Whispersong sighed, eyes filling with tears. What was she going to do?

Suddenly there was a squirm in her stomach again, and Whispersong inhaled in surprise. She shook her head. *More stress*, she thought. She sighed, then slowly got to her paws and walked back toward the warriors' den again, carefully avoiding Sparrowtail.

Whispersong curled up tightly on her nest, shivering from the cold. A tear slid down her cheek, her mind on Bumblefrost.

StarClan, I need help. I don't know what to do.

She let out a ragged breath. What *would* she do? She could not leave Bumblefrost, nor could she let him think he was worthless because of her Clanmates' words and actions.

I will make them see. I'll prove Bumblefrost's goodness if it's the last thing I do.

* * *

Whispersong took a bite from her shrew half-heartedly. Bumblefrost sat beside her silently, looking both depressed and angered. Echoheart and Hailstorm were lounging by the sunning-stones, sharing tongues.

Whispersong sighed, looking down at her meal again, then she blinked in surprise. Her belly looked bigger than normal. Whispersong laughed to herself. Well, of course it'd be getting bigger! They'd gotten back from the journey several days ago, and there had definitely not been enough prey to make her look like this while *on* the journey. She, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost had all been rather skinny before they'd returned to the Clans, and now they had enough prey to satisfy their hunger.

Then a strange feeling nagged her stomach again. It didn't seem like it was nerves, like it had last time.

What's been with me lately?

She shook her head then turned and glanced Bumblefrost, who was staring absently at his half-eaten mouse. "You alright?" she asked him.

He shrugged.

"Did you hear about the dawn patrol scenting Rainstar, Flamethorn, and Emberclaw yesterday?"

Bumblefrost nodded.

"What you think about it?" Whispersong sighed.

"I... I don't know. Obviously I'm angry that Rainstar would dare come back after what she's done, but... what's she doing here, by DawnClan?"

Whispersong nodded. "Yeah. What *is* she doing near DawnClan? Why not DayClan?"

There was silence.

"Oh, I never got a chance to ask you how the hunting patrol went yesterday."

Bumblefrost shrugged, sighing.

"They didn't bully you, did they?"

Bumblefrost shrugged again. "Well, no," he murmured after a long pause. "But they did keep an eye on me the entire time, and no one spoke to me, unless they really needed to. And when they did, it was with scorn, with contempt." He sighed. "I did what you told me; I tried to be polite, even when I wanted to claw their ears off. But they didn't show it back."

Whispersong growled. Why were they doing that to him? He'd even showed them respect, and they'd ignored him? "Did you catch anything?"

"Yeah: a rabbit that was out in the meadow. Pinepaw tried not to act impressed at how fast DayClan cats are, even though I'm not one of them anymore," Bumblefrost added quickly. "But I could see he was impressed. Eaglefeather narrowed his eyes at me, and Sunfur growled to stay away from the DayClan border. She said, 'If DayClan finds out you've returned and tried to join DawnClan, we'd look like fools'." Bumblefrost sighed.

Whispersong sighed too. "At least Pinepaw wasn't mean to you."

Bumblefrost shrugged.

"Young cats are easier to change. They will probably get used to you first."

"Not Cherrykit and Lilackit; they're dead scared of me."

"Well, you do have to understand *that* part. DayClan kidnapped them, Rainstar killed two kits in front of them..."

"I know."

There was a silence. Whispersong took another bite of her shrew, and Bumblefrost continued eating his mouse.

Whispersong glanced around her. It was just after sunhigh, and the camp was nearly empty because of the cats gone hunting.

Cherrykit and Lilackit played lazily in the browning grass, swatting at the leaves. Sagetail sat beside them with Meadowheart and Eaglefeather, while Creekfall was talking with Yellowflower and Goldheart. Yellowflower looked happy. Goldheart however, looked distant, tail twitching.

"Goldheart's doing it again," Whispersong pointed out to Bumblefrost. Bumblefrost followed her gaze to the orange tabby medicine cat.

"What's been with him? Lilyfoot never did that."

Whispersong shrugged, watching the bright orange tabby tom cautiously.

Then she felt another jerk in her stomach. She let out a breath of surprise again.

Bumblefrost turned to her in worry. "Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm fine," she meowed quietly. But she didn't *feel* fine.

What was wrong with her stomach?

* * *

By the time dusk came around, the Clan was busy once more. Eveningstar was going to lead the evening patrol with Star, Whispersong, and Echoheart, and they were about to leave.

Bumblefrost lay outside the apprentices' den, chin resting on his paws. He looked depressed again. Pinepaw and Needlepaw slipped by him, nodding at him before disappearing inside the den. Whispersong felt relieved. At least the apprentices were now acknowledging him, not scorning him like they had before.

"Whispersong?"

Whispersong turned.

"We're leaving," Echoheart meowed.

Whispersong took one last glance at Bumblefrost, then nodded and followed her sister outside the camp to Eveningstar and Star.

"Okay," Eveningstar meowed once they reached him, "we need to patrol all the borders, but first I want to go to the border where the dawn patrol scented Rainstar."

They nodded, then followed the large gray tom into the yellowing forest.

Echoheart was catching up to Eveningstar, telling him something. Whispersong found herself matching her pace with Star's. She turned to the silver tabby she-cat. "How's training been?" Whispersong asked.

Star shrugged. "Good. It's not the Tribe," she sighed, "but I think I'm getting along alright."

"Is Eveningstar a good mentor?"

Star nodded. "Yes, he really is. I like how he's accepted me for who I am and respected where I used to live. I caught a falcon today," she added, purring, "during training. He said he'd never seen a jump like that. He was impressed."

Whispersong smiled. "Well, you did live in the mountains, and you

learned to hunt birds like that for most of your life."

Star nodded. "But I'm not doing so great at the fighting."

"You'll get better."

"I don't know. I don't ever want to fight any other cat. What if we meet the one cat you're all scared of, who stole kits and killed innocent cats? What was her name?"

"Oh, Rainstar," Whispersong shivered.

"She sounds evil. No cat in the Tribe would ever do that. How can your StarClan ancestors allow it?"

"They don't have all the power over us," Whispersong sighed. "They just give us warnings: prophecies, dreams, signs... They can help, but they can't do it all."

Star nodded. "That sounds like the Tribe of Endless Hunting."

"But StarClan was on DawnClan's side while Rainstar was driven out, so I guess they do have some power. Now a new leader is leading DayClan, chosen by StarClan themselves." Whispersong sighed again. "I just hope Nettlestar learns from Rainstar's mistakes."

Star nodded, and they continued walking through the forest in silence, listening to the leaves crunching beneath their paws and watching the sky slowly fade from yellow to orange.

"Here we are."

Whispersong looked up as Eveningstar said this, quieting down. Echoheart was sniffing the air, fur spiking. "I smell her again."

Whispersong sniffed. The familiar stench filled her nose and caused her neck fur to stand on end. Memories flooded back to her, awful memories... "I do too," she muttered bitterly.

Star nodded. "It's fresh."

"Fresher than last time," Echoheart growled.

Eveningstar nodded, looking around.

Whispersong looked around, too. She could hear the river far to their left, flowing toward NightClan and DuskClan territory. They were near the border DawnClan didn't share with another Clan.

"She's been inside our territory now!" Echoheart hissed, sniffing just inside the border scent-marker. "Last time she was only near the border!"

Eveningstar growled. "Then let's remark the border again, but stronger." The three cats nodded. "But, Star, we don't need you to remark it; you don't have full DawnClan scent yet. We need it to be the strongest as possible to show Rainstar the message."

Star dipped her head to her mentor. "Okay."

Whispersong split up with Echoheart and Eveningstar, each going to a slightly different spot to cover more ground.

Whispersong paused beside a dense patch of bushes and remarked the border stronger, covering every mouse-length of the area she was remarking.

She paused again by a patch of ferns and grass, and stopped abruptly. Her stomach did another strange flip, and jerked again. She blinked, then tried to continue along the border, but had to stop again.

What is going on?

She stared down at her belly and gave it a couple of licks. Earlier she'd thought it was prey that was making her stomach look bigger, and that it was nerves making it spasm every now and then. But now, she wasn't so sure.

Maybe I should go and see Goldheart and Yellowflower; they'll know what's going on with me.

Whispersong nodded, turning around. There was another jerk in her stomach, and suddenly it all seemed familiar. She'd seen it before in other she-cats.

Whispersong froze, and it hit her. She gasped, struggling for air in the shock of her sudden realization.

The world spun around her, and she wobbled into the bushes, her vision disappearing faster than the setting sun. She heaved for breath.

I'm... I'm having kits.

Chapter 5

Whispersong felt the world around her slowly focus again. It was dark, and clouds hung above the forest, blocking out the starlight. She blinked. Her nose stung, and she smelled blood on it. She exhaled slowly, then looked around. She was lying on the cold, damp forest floor, the soggy wet leaves below her and the trees towering above her.

How'd I get down here?

Then she remembered.

Oh, no... No, no, no, no, no...

But she knew she was expecting kits. Why else would her stomach jerk around like it had been if there weren't unborn kits inside it? She shuddered. *Oh no, no, no.*

Whispersong took a deep breath of the misty air, then carefully pushed herself off the ground, shaking the dirt and damp leaves from her pelt. She stared around her at the gray and black forest. Her stomach jerked again. She sighed deeper.

Then she remembered that she was on the evening patrol, remarking the border where they'd smelled Rainstar. How long had she been here? Where were Eveningstar, Echoheart, and Star?

She sighed, then stared down at her belly, feeling a squirm. Now that she knew that she was having kits, she noticed their movements easier.

What am I going to do?

She could, of course, ask Goldheart or Yellowflower about it, but then the news would spread around DawnClan like wildfire, and she wasn't sure she wanted her Clanmates to know she was expecting kits just yet- especially since they were Bumblefrost's.

I should tell Bumblefrost, she thought, but then she second guessed it. Should she tell him? He wouldn't be able to keep it in, and she didn't want DawnClan to know about it. She sighed again, then looked at her swollen belly, her silver and gray tabby fur patchy in places from the stretching. How hadn't she noticed it before?

How hasn't any other cat noticed yet?

She knew they'd find out sooner or later, but she still didn't want to tell any cat. What would they all think?

"Whispersong!"

Whispersong hissed in fright, leaping into the air. She felt her fur quickly bristling and she arched her back at the incomer.

It was Echoheart.

"Echoheart! You scared the living daylights out of me!" Whispersong panted, twitching her giant, fluffed-up tail.

"Where have you been? You were supposed to remark the borders then meet us back at the place we split up! Great StarClan, Whispersong, you worried us!"

"I'm fine. I was, I was just..." Whispersong meowed, trying to not show her overweight stomach. "Um, how long were you waiting?"

"Not that long, but where in the name of StarClan were you?" she asked angrily.

"Right here, I must have... must have lost track of time."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure you're alright? You look like you've been lying in the dirt."

"I'm fine," Whispersong meowed. "Let's go."

"Okay..." Echoheart murmured skeptically.

Whispersong walked past her sister, letting her tail hang in an effort to try and hide her stomach.

"Wait!"

Whispersong spun around as her sister hissed this, and her heart jumped. "What?" she hissed back worriedly. Had Echoheart noticed her overweight belly?

"How... how did you not smell that earlier?" Echoheart's voice shook.

"Smell what?" Whispersong felt her heart thumping.

"The scent in the air," Echoheart breathed.

Whispersong sniffed, and for a moment she could only smell the damp bark, the soggy leaves, and her sister. Then she smelled it and froze. "Rainstar."

"Recently." Echoheart's voice trembled.

Whispersong sniffed again. The DayClan leader's scent was strong. Whispersong stiffened. Stronger than before. It was recent, too recent.

"This was tonight," Echoheart spoke up again, so quietly that Whispersong barely heard her.

Whispersong looked around. Rainstar's scent was strongest in the same place Whispersong had fainted. Rainstar had been there at the same time Whispersong was passed out. Icy shivers crawled up Whispersong's spine and her throat went dry. Rainstar had found her. She could have *killed* her. Whispersong trembled. Her stomach squirmed, and this time it wasn't from her kits. A fear stronger than anything she'd ever experienced took a hold of her, almost stronger than the fear of the bear they'd seen in the mountains.

But Rainstar *hadn't* killed her. She hadn't even touched her. That meant that Rainstar had a very good reason not to, and Rainstar usually didn't have reason. Whispersong's heart began to race faster than a monster on the Thunderpath.

She felt cold claws of fear ripping through her chest. Rainstar knew; she knew that Whispersong, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost were

finally back; she already knew that Bumbelforst loved Whispersong, and she knew that Bumblefrost had betrayed DayClan. Whispersong shuddered violently. She probably also knew that Whispersong was having kits, too. Rainstar was going to use this knowledge to her advantage. She was going to have another plan.

Whispersong's legs buckled underneath her, and she stumbled to the ground. Echoheart, blue eyes filled with worry, leaned over Whispersong.

Whispersong looked up at her sister weakly, voice shaking. "Rainstar knows we're back, and knows Bumblefrost betrayed DayClan for me. She knows, Echoheart. She knows. And she's going to have another plan with this knowledge."

Echoheart looked at Whispersong, her blue eyes staring in horror into Whispersong's brown. They both knew of Rainstar's last plan, and it'd involved killing kits. What would come next?

* * *

Whispersong, Echoheart, Star, and Eveningstar walked trance-like through the dark, foggy forest and back to camp. Not one of them spoke, and all of them stared ahead unblinkingly.

Once they'd passed through the brambles, Eveningstar whispered something to Sunfur, who looked concerned. "Senior warrior meeting!" the deputy called into the night, her breath swirling from her jaws like fog. Bronzepelt, Sparktail, and Rustypelt poked their heads out of the warriors' den sleepily, blinking and stretching.

Whispersong avoided her father and walked the long way around the camp to the warriors' den, heart still pounding at the thought of Rainstar finding her lying unconscious in the woods. She shuddered again, passing the apprentice den.

Then she heard something unexpected.

"They were huge. Towering into the sky and piercing the clouds like claws..."

Whispersong didn't believe her ears. Was that *Bumblefrost* talking to

the three apprentices?

"Really? Are those the mountains that you can see from the meadow?" Pinepaw asked.

"Sparrowtail told me about those!" exclaimed Rosepaw. "They're *way* past DayClan territory."

"And further than the Pointed Mountain and the Moonfall," Bumblefrost added in. Whispersong felt her heart warm at the voices; the apprentices were starting to accept him.

Her stomach jerked again, and she smiled. Bumblefrost was going to be a great father, but she couldn't tell him just yet. *Not yet*, she told herself. *Not yet.*

Whispersong smiled again, then left the apprentices' den and headed to the warriors' den.

Whispersong awoke with the sun stabbing through the thick branches of the den. She blinked quickly, eyes adjusting to the brightness.

Her stomach twitched slightly, and all the events from last night flooded back to her. She let out a long breath.

She looked around the den. Only a few warriors were still sleeping: Creekfall, Eaglefeather, Moonshine, and Sunfur. Whispersong blinked. It was probably nearly sunhigh.

Why would I be sleeping in so late? Whispersong sighed. *Because I'm expecting kits.*

She knew that when she-cats were expecting kits, they were exhausted more often, more hungry, and more sleepy. She sighed again, still not able to comprehend the fact that she was having Bumblefrost's kits.

She got up and stretched, then exited the den. The camp was quiet. The sun shone above in a cloudless blue sky, but the weather was still cold, as it would be when leaf-bare approached.

Rayclaw and Hailstorm were rustling by the sunning-stones, Pinepaw and Needlepaw chanting, "Fight, fight, fight!" beside them. Clovertail and Sparrowtail were coming back from the dawn patrol, with Sparktail and Gravelpelt following. Eveningstar, Spruceclaw, and Rustypelt were lounging in a patch of sunlight by the fresh-kill log, talking. Twilightfoot and Copperleaf were coming back from a walk together in the forest. Meadowheart and Eaglefeather were talking with Goldheart, probably about their kits, which were due to be born quite soon. And Sagetail was showing her kits out of camp to go get a drink of water from the stream.

Whispersong smiled. She remembered that when she and Echoheart were young kits, Sparktail and Rustypelt would take them to the stream to drink, the only time kits were allowed to leave the camp, and it had to be by a warrior's supervision. Cherrykit and Lilackit looked frightened though, not excited to be leaving camp. Whispersong knew they were afraid of meeting Rainstar along the way, and Whispersong felt a stab of anger.

Life wasn't as Whispersong had imagined it would be as a kit; it was so much harder. She sighed. And Cherrykit and Lilackit were experiencing the difficulties in life now, as kits. They shouldn't have to feel this when they were still so young.

"Hey, look who decided to make an appearance."

Whispersong's heart jumped, and she turned around. But it was only Echoheart.

"You've become so jumpy lately," Echoheart commented, sitting beside Whispersong in the sunlight. Whispersong shrugged, trying to sit normally and hide her growing stomach at the same time.

Echoheart didn't notice. She was staring at Hailstorm and Rayclaw, who were kicking up dust. Then Echoheart suddenly turned to her and exclaimed, "Guess what I overheard!"

"What?" Whispersong asked warily.

"I was getting some fresh-kill with Clovertail, and do you see Eveningstar, Rustypelt, and Spruceclaw over there by the fresh-kill

log?"

Whispersong nodded; she'd seen them earlier.

"We overheard Eveningstar say, 'You know, it's almost time Cherrykit and Lilackit are apprenticed'," Echoheart purred.

"And...?" Whispersong asked, not getting the point. Of course they were ready to be apprenticed soon. They were going to be six moons old at the next full moon.

"He also said that he needs to find mentors for them, and I bet he means us!" she squealed in a kit-like manner. "I know it's us, Whispersong. There are two of them and two of us! We haven't had an apprentice yet, and it's been almost four seasons since we've been made warriors!"

Whispersong felt her heart sink. She and Echoheart had always planned on becoming warriors and mentors together. But they wouldn't become mentors together. Now that Whispersong was expecting kits, she was a queen, and queens didn't mentor apprentices. She didn't know what to tell her sister. They'd planned on it their whole life, and Whispersong had ruined it.

She couldn't bring herself to tell Echoheart about it. She just couldn't. So she pretended to look thrilled, smiling and nodding along with her sister.

But she knew it wouldn't last. Sometime soon everyone would know she was having kits, and Echoheart would be shocked. And what would everyone else say? Her Clanmates would probably be really angry that she would be mothering half-Clan kits.

Whispersong's heart sank lower. She was being torn from every cat she held close, slowly losing every cat she cared for. And soon it'd be all of DawnClan.

* * *

Whispersong pounced from the grasses, missing the rabbit by a mouse-length. She watched it dart away through the pale brown meadow, kicking up dust. Mouse dung!

"Close!" Bumblefrost called. "But yet so far." He trotted out from behind the treeline.

"Shut up," she muttered.

"You're still learning!" Bumblefrost persisted, flicking his tail across her ears affectionately.

"I've caught rabbits before though," Whispersong muttered.

"Yes, in the *forest*. Not many DawnClan cats can catch rabbits out in the open like that."

Whispersong forced a smile. But that rabbit had been scrawny, starving, and slow. It'd been weak! She should have been able to catch it! She sighed. She knew why she hadn't caught it. Her growing belly full of kits was exhausting her and slowing her down.

"Hey, we're on a hunting patrol over *here*!" Bronzepelt called from the treeline, looking annoyed. Clovertail avoided their gazes, but looked annoyed all the same.

Whispersong sighed. Even Clovertail was distancing herself from her now.

Whispersong nudged Bumblefrost half-heartedly, and they dragged themselves toward the rest of the hunting patrol.

"I don't know why Eveningstar let you be on the same patrol as Bumblefrost," Bronzepelt muttered to Whispersong. "You're getting distracted. A newborn kit could have caught that rabbit. The Clan needs to be put first, Whispersong."

Whispersong gritted her teeth. "I know," she muttered bitterly. He was treating her like an apprentice! And it wasn't *Bumblefrost* who'd distracted her. She hadn't even *been* distracted! It was her unborn kits weighing her down! Whispersong narrowed her eyes, then sniffed and walked back through the forest.

Bumblefrost was about to follow her, but Bronzepelt meowed, "No. You stay at the back of the patrol. And don't you even think about making a run for it, or attacking one of us, DayClan cat."

"I'm not going to, *DawnClan cat*," Bumblefrost retorted, narrowing his pale green eyes.

Whispersong wanted to say, "You tell him, Bumblefrost," but she knew she'd be in big trouble for disrespecting a senior warrior. And Bumblefrost saying that wasn't exactly the best response. If he wanted respect in DawnClan, he'd need to show it to get it. And even though no cat was giving him a chance to, he wasn't exactly showing respect, which wasn't getting him anywhere.

She sighed, then dragged herself through the forest, watching the colored leaves above fall from the trees as a cool breeze blew across the treetops. Her paws crunched on the fallen ones below her, and she found herself shivering, and not just from the breeze.

Leaf-bare was approaching yet again, with sickness and scarce food; and her kits would be born right in the middle of it.

When they returned to the camp, Whispersong went straight to the warriors' den and didn't come back out. She was probably supposed to be helping with something or another, but she didn't care. She wasn't even thinking of warrior duties.

Bumblefrost was not being treated fairly; leaf-bare was on its way; her kits were going to be noticeable inside her belly; everyone would find out; she'd lose even more of her Clanmates' respect; then her kits would be born, half-Clan, probably also treated unfairly; and on top of all that, there was the prophecy. She closed her eyes. What was she going to do? There was so much on her mind she felt like she was going to explode.

Whispersong jerked as someone entered the warriors' den.

"You alright?" Bumblefrost asked.

She almost said yes, but that wasn't the truth. She shook her head. "I'm so stressed about everything." She blinked. "Aren't you not allowed to be in the warriors' den?"

Bumblefrost shrugged. "Eveningstar and Sunfur took the evening patrol, and every other cat is helping and worrying about

Meadowheart, so no cat will notice."

"Helping and worrying about Meadowheart?"

"Didn't you hear? Meadowheart's kits are on their way."

"Already?" Whispersong exclaimed.

Bumblefrost nodded.

"You shouldn't go near her then; don't go near the nursery if you can help it. She'll be really protective of them, and you, being a former DayClan cat, would be clawed at for sure."

Bumblefrost nodded. "I know." He paused. "So, tell me what's wrong."

Whispersong sighed. "You're not being accepted; I'm being shunned by my closest Clanmates; I'm losing more of them by the day; leaf-bare is coming with sickness and hunger; and the prophecy is still looming over my head..." She trailed off, avoiding Bumblefrost's eyes.

"There's something else; I can tell. What is it, Whispersong?"

Whispersong hesitated. She had to tell him. He'd know sooner or later. He had a right to know; he was her mate and these kits were his as much as they were hers. She sighed. "I'm... I'm having kits."

"You what?" Bumblefrost exclaimed.

"I am having your kits."

Bumblefrost's eyes glowed. "Really? I'm going to be a father?"

Whispersong smiled weakly, but didn't say anything.

"But... but they'll be half-Clan. They won't be accepted here."

"I know. I'm scared for us, and our kits."

"Who else knows?"

"No one." She sighed deeply. "When my parents find out, they will never talk to me again, even though they're already ignoring me anyway. And when Echoheart finds out, I don't know what she's going to say, because... because... well, now I can't help with the prophecy anytime soon. And I'm scared about that part. The prophecy said that with *two* cats, the forest will become one, not with only *one* cat! I'm one of the Two, Bumblefrost; the Clans need me! But how can I be one of the Two if I have kits to take care of every heartbeat of every day? What if the prophecy can't be fulfilled because of me?"

"We'll figure it out, don't worry," sighed Bumblefrost.

Whispersong sighed too, feeling the kits squirm in her belly.

Oh, StarClan, please help me. I don't know what to do anymore.

Chapter 6

The first snow of leaf-bare swirled from the sky, and a light gray fog was hovering amongst the treetops. Echoheart shivered beside Hailstorm as they walked back from a barely- successful hunting patrol, her pelt pressed against his in an effort to maintain their warmth.

Meadowheart's kits had been born a quarter-moon ago, and since then, the weather had cooled significantly. Frost was constantly appearing on the trees, and the fog hardly ever left.

A snowflake landed on Echoheart's nose, and she licked it off, shivering.

She carried a limp, puny mouse, and Eaglefeather had a chickadee in his jaws. Hailstorm, Sparrowtail, and Rosepaw had nothing.

By the time they returned to the camp, a thin layer of snow had frosted the ground, and everyone's pads were frozen, except Echoheart's; the freezing cold weather in the mountains with constant snow, ice, and frigid rocks had made Echoheart's pads stronger, since they'd been in that type of weather for there for nearly four moons, including the journey to and from the mountains.

Eaglefeather immediately went to the nursery to give Meadowheart his chickadee, and Echoheart dropped her mouse on the shrinking fresh-kill pile. Then she turned, leading Hailstorm to the warriors' den, where they could warm up. They passed Whispersong and Bumblefrost, who were talking quietly to each other.

Echoheart blinked as she noticed something. Why was Whispersong's belly getting so full? Was she stealing prey that was supposed to be for their other Clanmates? Anger rose up inside her. That didn't seem like something Whispersong would do; but she needed to ask.

"I'll be right there," she meowed to Hailstorm, who nodded, teeth chattering, and disappeared inside the warriors' den. Echoheart turned to Whispersong. "Can you take a walk with me?"

Whispersong glanced up, looking wary, but she nodded. She touched noses with Bumblefrost, then followed Echoheart outside the camp.

"It's so cold; why couldn't we talk right there?" Whispersong stammered, shivering.

Echoheart narrowed her eyes against the frigid wind. "Because I don't want any cat overhearing us."

"Did you find out something about the prophecy?" Whispersong asked eagerly.

"No."

Whispersong flinched from Echoheart's curt reply, then murmured, "Oh."

Echoheart stopped by a patch of thick pine trees; there wasn't any snow underneath them, and they looked like they offered shelter from the bitter-cold weather, so Echoheart quickly ducked and went under them. Whispersong followed her hesitantly.

"It is warmer under here," Whispersong commented in what seemed like an effort to lighten the mood.

Echoheart didn't answer. She watched her sister for a moment, then asked, "Have you been eating more prey than you should? Stealing what should be the elders' and the queens'?"

Whispersong looked shocked. "No," she meowed defensively. "Why would you think that? I'd never do that!"

"Then explain to me why you've gotten fat," Echoheart retorted.

"*Fat*?" Whispersong snarled, recoiling as if Echoheart had clawed her.

"It's no secret that your stomach is so big!"

Whispersong froze. "Who else has noticed?"

"Why?" Echoheart narrowed her eyes.

"Who else has noticed?" Whispersong demanded.

"Probably no one, but why do you care who's noticed? *Have* you been stealing prey?" Echoheart spat.

"Of course not!"

Echoheart lashed her tail. "Well it sure looks like it!"

"I'm *not*!"

"Then why in the name of StarClan has your belly gotten so fat?" Echoheart growled.

Whispersong opened her mouth, ears flattened, but nothing came out.

"WELL?"

Whispersong flinched, shutting her eyes as if it was painful to talk. "Specting... its."

"I can't understand you," Echoheart growled impatiently, claws flexing.

"I said I'm expecting kits!"

Echoheart froze. "You... what?" she sputtered.

"I AM EX-PECT-TING KITS," she enunciated angrily.

There was a long silence, then Echoheart asked bitterly, "Whose? Bumblefrost's?"

"Who else's?" Whispersong retorted, brown eyes ablaze.

Then all Echoheart's fury exploded. "How could you?" she snarled,

bristling her fur and baring her teeth. She felt utterly betrayed by the cat she thought would never, ever betray her.

"I thought you liked Bumblefrost!" Whispersong growled.

"Yeah, I thought I did too. But how can I like him if he's the reason you're expecting kits; the reason y-"

Whispersong thrashed her tail. "You know, he's also the reason you're alive! He saved your life *twice* on the jour-"

"I know, and I'm grateful for *that*! But-"

"But what?" Whispersong spat.

Echoheart barely heard her. "How... how in the name of StarClan," she muttered, shaking with more fury and more fear than she'd ever experienced, "is the prophecy going to be fulfilled with only one of the Two? I can't do any of this by myself! You have jeopardized the existence of the Clans by having those stupid, fox-dunged kits, Whispersong-"

"Don't you *dare* talk about my kits that way!" Whispersong snarled, standing up taller.

"So you're more concerned about your kits than the safety of all the Clans, more than the prophecy and your Clanmates... more than me?" Echoheart growled, more terrified than angry now. How could Whispersong have kits when Echoheart needed her? Did she only care about herself? "What's going to happen now, Whispersong? You're basically dooming the Clans to destruction! And you're letting *StarClan* down! We'll be letting our warrior ancestors down! I'd be so ashamed! Aren't you?" she growled, "I cannot believe th-"

"I'm scared too!"

"No you're not," Echoheart retorted without thinking.

Whispersong flinched. "I am!" she spat, claws extending.

But Echoheart couldn't believe her even though she wanted to; she felt betrayed beyond anything she had ever imagined. Whispersong

had just made a deep scar in Echoheart's heart, and Echoheart wasn't sure it'd ever heal. She narrowed her eyes and muttered, "You just ruined everything, Whispersong; I hope you know that. Have fun with your stupid lumps of fur while the Clans are destroyed around you."

Then Echoheart spun around without a backward glance, racing out from underneath the pine trees so fast that the branches scraped her face, stinging like fire in the ice-cold air.

She flinched in pain, but it still didn't hurt as much as her heart.

* * *

Echoheart stared at the four tiny bodies huddling close to their mother's belly as she sat beside Eaglefeather, Sagetail, and Sagetail's two kits, seeing Meadowheart's now half-moon-old kits for the first time.

"Have you named them yet?" Cherrykit asked eagerly, watching the four tiny kits with wide, green eyes. Lilackit sat beside her sister, more apprehensive and shy. It looked like Lilackit still hadn't fully recovered from being kidnapped by DayClan, and Echoheart couldn't blame her. She still hardly talked, and it made Echoheart sad for her.

"Yes," Eaglefeather purred, puffing out his dark brown and black fur in pride.

"What are they?" Sagetail purred, watching the four newborn kits.

"What're their names? What're their names?" Cherrykit squealed, her red fur spiked in excitement. She bounced in circles around Sagetail and Lilackit, and Echoheart twitched her whiskers in amusement.

"Stop that, Cherrykit, you'll disturb them," Sagetail muttered.

"Oops," Cherrykit whispered, crouching low and flattening her ears. "Sorry."

"You're fine," Meadowheart purred, licking one of the kits' heads.

"They're so cute," Echoheart commented quietly, then she sighed as she was reminded of Whispersong. She'd be having kits too. They'd need her like these kits needed Meadowheart. The helpless, future warriors of DawnClan would need their mother's attention. Echoheart felt a stab of pity for her sister. But Echoheart needed Whispersong more than Whispersong needed her future kits. Yes, maybe Echoheart was being selfish in Whispersong's eyes, but the Clans were relying on her and Whispersong! They didn't have time for kits when the Clans could die around them! Echoheart sighed again.

"So what are their names?" Lilackit murmured.

"This one, the black tom-kit with the orange patch of fur on his nose, is Pollenkit," purred Eaglefeather.

"Because it looks like he got pollen on his nose," Meadowheart laughed.

"It's a cute name," Sagetail meowed.

Meadowheart purred and smiled.

"What about the other ones?" Lilackit asked quietly.

"This one, the she-kit," Meadowheart purred, pointing to the tortoiseshell and white she-kit, "is called Pansykit."

"OH YES! That's so cute!" Cherrykit squealed, bouncing up and down.

"Cherrykit!" Sagetail scolded impatiently.

"Oops, sorry."

Lilackit glared at her sister. "Shush!"

Cherrykit stuck out her tongue at Lilackit. But Sagetail didn't notice.

"And this tom-kit," Meadowheart pointed her nose at the dark brown tabby, "is Acornkit. Then the lighter brown tom-kit is Cricketkit, because we've noticed that when he sleeps he chirps like

a little cricket."

Echoheart let out a breath of laughter.

"That's really cute," purred Lilackit.

"Cricketkit, Pollenkit, Acornkit, and Pansykit," Cherrykit squealed. "They're adorable!"

Meadowheart and Eaglefeather purred.

"Let's go now, Bronzepelt wanted to share a meal with us. I told him we'd be right there," Sagetail murmured, and Cherrykit and Lilackit, after one last glance at Meadowheart's kits, followed their mother.

Echoheart turned to Eaglefeather and Meadowheart, meowed, "Congratulations again," and then she too left the nursery.

An icy wind tore at her fur the heartbeat she stepped from the sheltered nursery. She let out a breath of shock, watching it swirl like fog into the gray sky. The snow had stopped, but the ground now had a thin white layer on it. The frozen brown grasses were weighed down by the frost clinging to them, and the quivering trees above were smothered in white as the low, thick fog blew across the treetops.

Echoheart shivered, hurrying across the camp to get to the warriors' den, but the ice-cold wind slowed her down.

She was just about frozen solid by the time she entered the warriors' den, or at least she felt like she was. She blinked against the sudden dimness, and saw all of the DawnClan warriors huddled in their nests. It was warmer because of all their body heat, and Echoheart relaxed as it thawed her frozen pelt.

Echoheart spotted Whispersong with Bumblefrost, secluded in one of the den's corners, and she quickly avoided them. She and Whispersong hadn't talked since their argument a quarter-moon ago, and she didn't plan on talking to her sister in the distant future. She still felt betrayed, betrayed beyond anything she'd ever imagined.

Echoheart hadn't told any cat that Whispersong was expecting kits, and Whispersong seemed to be doing a good job at hiding it, so no other cat knew. She wished she had told some cat. But she never had. And now she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Echoheart veered away from her sister, avoided her parents, and finally found Hailstorm, Clovertail, and Rayclaw at the back of the den.

"H-Hello," she stammered quietly, still shivering. The wind howled outside, and Echoheart was thankful for the sheltered den that protected them against the weather.

"Where've you been, Echoheart?" Clovertail asked. "We thought you'd gone hunting or something and had never come back!"

"I was visiting Meadowheart's kits. Have you seen them yet?" Echoheart meowed, sitting down close beside Hailstorm to warm up.

"Yeah, I saw them yesterday," Rayclaw nodded, smiling. "They're cute."

"Didn't she name one of them Pansykit?" Hailstorm asked.

Echoheart nodded, teeth chattering. "Yes, the she-kit is Pansykit. And they named the tom-kits Pollenkit, Cricketkit, and Acornkit."

"That's cute." Hailstorm smiled.

There was a brief silence, and Echoheart could hear the wind raging through the forest relentlessly. The murmur of the other warriors in the den was almost nonexistent against the snowstorm outside.

"What's with Whispersong? How can she sit by a DayClan cat?" Clovertail muttered suddenly. Clovertail, along with many others, was avoiding Whispersong because she was mates with Bumblefrost. Echoheart sighed inwardly; and it'd get worse when everyone found out Whispersong was having his kits. The whole Clan would know soon enough. Echoheart felt a sudden stab of worry, then she stopped herself. This was Whispersong's problem; why was Echoheart worried for her? It was her own mouse-dunged

fault. Echoheart scowled.

"What?" Hailstorm asked, seeing Echoheart's facial expression.

Echoheart shook her head. "Of course she's being secluded with Bumblefrost as her mate; no cat really likes him."

"I thought you did," Rayclaw muttered, narrowing his eyes. "Bumblefrost told me so; he'd begun to like and trust you too."

Echoheart blinked, feeling a twinge of guilt. She *had* grown to like and trust Bumblefrost while on their journey, and she had begun to accept that he and Whispersong were mates. Echoheart hadn't expected herself to change this much when they returned. Now, just because DawnClan disliked Bumblefrost and because she was around cats who disliked him, she was beginning to dislike him again. Maybe it had to do with the fact that now Whispersong was expecting his kits, but he still was the same cat regardless. Echoheart sighed; Whispersong did deserve him. And he deserved a chance.

Echoheart fixed her previous statement. "I do trust him. He's a great cat once you get to know him; I guess I just find it hard that he'd ever be in DawnClan."

Hailstorm nodded in agreement. Clovertail blinked beside him, looking annoyed.

"So, you talked to Bumblefrost?" Echoheart asked Rayclaw.

The orange tom nodded, sighing. "He deserves a chance, like... like Stormpaw did."

Echoheart remembered that Stormpaw and Rayclaw had become really close during Stormpaw's hardships with her mother, Rainstar. They'd trusted each other; so much so that Stormpaw went with Rayclaw to DawnClan to help form a plan to overthrow her own mother.

"He's nice," Rayclaw continued. "He was closed-off at first, and I can understand why. Stormpaw was like that in the beginning, too," Rayclaw added quietly. "But he seems good."

Hailstorm blinked. "I've never talked to him; and personally I don't really want to."

"Why? Just because he was a DayClan cat?" Rayclaw retorted. "Stormpaw was from DayClan, and she helped save all the other Clans' kits!"

"I know, I know," Hailstorm muttered, looking exasperated at Rayclaw's constant mention of the dead DayClan apprentice.

Clovertail sighed. "I don't know..."

"He doesn't want to be a part of DayClan anymore, not after what Rainstar's done. He never liked her plans in the first place," Echoheart meowed.

Rayclaw nodded vaguely, staring out the den distantly, probably thinking that he was just like Stormpaw had been.

Echoheart followed his gaze. The powdery snow was now a few mouse-lengths deep now; it was dumping so hard that Echoheart thought tomorrow they might be buried under the snow. Slowly the white outside faded to gray, then to black. Darkness swallowed them whole; there were no stars or the moon to bring light to the night. The wind rattled the tree branches outside, creaking eerily in the complete blackness. The snow crept further and further inside the den entrance, forcing the warriors to move their nests to the back of the den. Echoheart curled up beside Hailstorm, Clovertail, Rayclaw, and multiple other warriors, all sharing their body heat. Echoheart purred and closed her eyes, letting her Clanmates' warmth lull her to sleep.

Chapter 7

Echoheart awoke to the sound of screaming. She jerked her head up instantly, her heart thundering in her chest.

"Cherrykit, that's going to be too... deep." Sagetail's voice rung out in the cold.

Echoheart sighed with relief; she'd thought that it'd been terrified screaming. But it was just Cherrykit squealing in joy. Echoheart laughed silently to herself. She could picture Sagetail's face as she'd said that, and Cherrykit's as she landed in the deep snow.

"What was that?" Hailstorm asked groggily.

"Just Cherrykit," Clovertail yawned. "Of course."

Echoheart got to her paws and arched her back, stretching. Then she padded to the den entrance and widened her eyes. The snow was as deep as she was tall. The trees were white with frost and snow, and the thick fog still hung on the treetops, freezing the forest with its chill. Echoheart shivered. No more snow was falling, and the wind had died down, but the air was still bitterly cold.

Cherrykit didn't seem to care though. She leapt around in the drift, patches of snow clinging to her red pelt. Her light green eyes were aglow and her tail was swishing in happiness. "Come on Lilackit! It's our first real snow ever! Come play!"

Lilackit looked at the snow skeptically from the nursery entrance. "It's not the *first* snow."

"Yeah, but the other snowstorms were hardly even snowstorms! It was just a layer of frost! *This* we can play in!"

"Isn't it cold?"

"Yeah, a bit." Cherrykit shrugged. "But it's worth it!"

"You can't stay out too much longer; the cold isn't good for you," Bronzepelt meowed, trudging up behind Sagetail. Sagetail nodded at her mate.

"Are you just going to sit there all day?" Hailstorm grumbled behind Echoheart.

"Well, sor-ry," Echoheart meowed sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "Aren't we the only ones left in the den?"

Hailstorm nodded, yawning. "Basically. It's just me, you, Clovertail, and Gravelpelt, but he's still sleeping. I think he was on guard most of the night."

Echoheart shivered at the thought of having to guard the camp in last night's unrelenting weather, and she silently thanked Gravelpelt for doing it for the good of the Clan.

"He must have been freezing," Clovertail commented, shivering too.

Echoheart nodded. "Let's go get something to eat," she yawned.

"There won't be much," Hailstorm warned. "And no cat could hunt yesterday."

Echoheart sighed. It seemed like just yesterday it was last leaf-bare, and now leaf-bare had set upon them again. "Maybe we should see if we can go hunt."

"In this weather? Not even the birds will be stirring!" Hailstorm muttered.

"And I think Eveningstar already sent out a few hunting patrols to try. I heard them talking about it this morning just after dawn," Clovertail meowed, "before I fell back to sleep."

"Well then where is everyone else?"

"I think most everybody went on the patrols," Clovertail sighed. Then she pushed out of the den and leapt through the deep snow. Hailstorm followed in her footsteps, jumping into the holes she'd made heartbeats before. Echoheart leapt after them, relieved to find

that the snow was becoming shallower; the deepest drifts were by the warriors' den, and after that it only became a thin layer atop the forest floor.

The camp was empty and silent. The breeze creaking in the high branches of the trees above them was the only sound in the camp, besides Cherrykit and Lilackit playing in the snow. Bronzepelt and Sagetail were talking with the elders near the fresh-kill log, but other than them, Echoheart couldn't see any more of her Clanmates.

"I knew it," Hailstorm grunted, staring at the dug-out snow patch by the half-buried fresh-kill log. The hole was empty.

"That's what you get for sleeping in so late," snapped Copperleaf. "While every other cat has been doing something to help the Clan, you mouse-brains were just in there snoring away!"

Echoheart flinched. Copperleaf was never grumpy. She blinked, guessing that the shortage of food was making his temper short.

"I don't see you helping," Hailstorm muttered quietly.

Bronzepelt heard him. "You should know better than to disrespect your elders, Hailstorm," he scolded. "I know that this hunger and cold, and just leaf-bare in general, is making us all grumpy," he sighed, "but you should know better."

Hailstorm grumbled an apology, then trudged away across the camp again to the sunning-stones, which were protruding from the snow just enough for Hailstorm to sit on. Clovertail sighed, then bounded after her brother.

"You just missed the last of the prey," Sagetail murmured to Echoheart. "The other warriors ate the last of it this morning; so now every cat is on a hunting patrol," she sighed, "in an attempt to scavenge any prey in this weather."

Echoheart's stomach growled. "I feel bad that I slept in; I should have helped."

Sagetail shrugged. "It was all so hectic this morning to organize all the patrols that no cat realized you three were still sleeping.

Bronzepelt and I offered to stay back and watch over the camp and the kits with Meadowheart. But other than us, and the elders, every cat is out hunting, even the medicine cats."

Echoheart widened her eyes. "Goldheart and Yellowflower went hunting?"

Sagetail laughed. "Yes." Then she turned to Echoheart and meowed, "You know, Bumblefrost volunteered to go on a hunting patrol, before most of the DawnClan cats did."

"Really?" She would have been happy for Bumblefrost for trying to show loyalty and try and help DawnClan out, but Whispersong was having his kits, so he had little to no hope at being trusted again; he may as well not even try any more. She scowled to herself.

"Yes. He's really trying to prove himself," Sagetail murmured. "I do think he's a good cat, and he surely helped you and Whispersong in the mountains, didn't he?"

"Yeah; he saved my life twice," Echoheart murmured quietly, staring at her paws.

"You know, I think I'm starting to trust him, and so are the apprentices and a few warriors that I've noticed. Whispersong made a good point when you three first came back," Sagetail meowed. "She reminded us that Stormpaw had gained our trust in just one day, but no one was giving Bumblefrost a chance like they did with Stormpaw."

Echoheart grumbled that she agreed, staring at Clovertail and Hailstorm sitting side by side on the sunning-stones. Sooner or later, the Clan would find out about Whispersong's and Bumblefrost's kits, and she was sure the Clan would react like Echoheart had, in fury. Then all the trust he'd gained would be for nothing.

* * *

Echoheart sat beside Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail as the last of the hunting patrols trudged back into the camp. The previous three patrols that had returned had, in total, caught two mice, a rabbit,

and a few various birds; it was quite a bit considering the weather, but it wasn't enough to feed the whole Clan a decent meal.

Echoheart's stomach growled as Sparktail, Goldheart, Yellowflower, Needlepaw, and Star walked into the camp carrying a squirrel and a vole. They dropped it into the prey-hole and sat down, looking exhausted. Eveningstar blinked in sadness as he looked at the prey pile.

"We may as well eat most of it now and stay strong while we have it," Eveningstar sighed. "Queens and kits will be fed first, then elders."

Echoheart watched as Eaglefeather grabbed a vole for Meadowheart, then Sagetail picked up a sparrow and ushered her kits back towards the nursery.

"Let the others eat first," Twilightfoot meowed as Eveningstar nodded at the elders to take their meals. "The warriors and apprentices who did all this hunting should take their pick next; we did nothing." Eveningstar opened his mouth to protest, but Twilightfoot meowed with finality, "Let them eat next."

"Very well; if you wish." Eveningstar blinked. When all three elders nodded, he meowed, "Any cat on the patrols today, take a piece of prey and share it with another cat or two; we need to ration it."

Echoheart watched most of the cats around her step forward to pick their prey, and then she caught a glimpse of Hailstorm trying to squeeze past Sunfur and Copperleaf to the fresh-kill pile. Copperleaf saw him and growled, "You weren't on a hunting patrol."

Sunfur eyed Hailstorm with disappointment, eyes narrowed angrily.

Hailstorm shrunk back and lashed his tail, then turned and dragged himself through the snow toward the warriors' den, gray and white fur sagging on his shoulders. Echoheart sighed. If the weather kept up like this, how would DawnClan make it through the hardship of the entire leaf-bare, especially with the decreasing amounts of prey and increasing amount of mouths to feed?

"Why are you taking prey?" a voice growled. Echoheart jerked her head up. Rustypelt was facing Bumblefrost threateningly, gray-brown tabby fur bristling and ears flattened, even though the former DayClan tom was larger than he was.

Bumblefrost set down the rabbit he was carrying and narrowed his eyes, tail lashing. "In case you hadn't noticed, I actually caught prey, and you didn't."

The clearing went silent.

"And I actually belong in DawnClan. You don't," Rustypelt snarled, teeth bared.

"Rustypelt..." Sparktail warned, sitting rigid behind him.

"Oh, and now you're supporting him too?" Rustypelt turned on his mate, hissing. Sparktail flinched as if he'd clawed her.

"You know, Bumblefrost does have a point; he did catch that rabbit," Sunfur murmured.

Bumblefrost glanced at the deputy in surprise. He blinked in gratitude and dipped his head. Sunfur blinked back.

"But Rustypelt has served DawnClan so much longer than he has," Bronzepelt muttered.

"And what about Star? She was on a hunting patrol and didn't catch anything. But you still let her get prey!" Meadowheart pointed out.

"That's because *she* didn't belong to a Clan of evil traitors to the warrior code!" Moonshine growled, casting a mutinous glare at Bumblefrost.

Star crouche lower to the ground as the arguing intensified around her.

"Bumblefrost is trying to prove he can help! And he did!" Pinepaw pointed out loudly.

Creekfall rounded on his son. "You stay out of this! This is a

warriors' discussion!"

"Yes, go back to your den!" Aspenleaf ordered her kits angrily. Needlepaw, Rosepaw, and Pinepaw scowled and stomped back across the camp as the argument escalated.

"Stop!" Eveningstar yowled, trying to be heard above the growling, but he was without prevail. Goldheart and Yellowflower looked concerned beside their leader, eyes widened.

Echoheart was frozen, staring in disbelief; DawnClan had never argued like this before.

"Fine!" Bumblefrost hissed, eyes ablaze with fury. "I'll just be your Clan's servant!" he spat sarcastically. "I've been *trying* to show you I am not loyal to DayClan anymore! I've caught prey for you! I've tried to show that you *can* trust me! But I guess I just *won't* have prey; you selfish flea-brains can have it," he spat, swatting angrily at the prey by his paws.

"No, you deserve prey! They're blind if they cannot see what an amazing cat you are! And if they won't let you eat, then I'll give you *my* prey!" growled Whispersong, glaring at the cats around her.

"Yes, you could do without some prey for a while," Rustypelt sneered at his daughter, "with that overgrown belly of yours!"

Whispersong froze, shrinking over her stomach. Echoheart's heart raced beneath her ribs. She hated her sister for having kits, especially in times like these, when Echoheart needed her so much. Echoheart wouldn't want to be exposed like that in front of the whole Clan either, and especially not by their father like that.

Gravelpelt narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, why do you look like you've been stealing prey?"

Bumblefrost growled and stepped in front of Whispersong. "She has *not*!"

Sunfur narrowed her eyes. "Then why do y—"

"Are you... are you having... *kits*?" Goldheart asked, eyes wide.

Every cat immediately fell silent after the medicine cat's statement, and the only sound was the wind in the treetops.

Whispersong didn't answer, but she swallowed nervously; Bumblefrost edged closer to her, narrowing his eyes at the cats around them.

"Bumblefrost's, probably," growled Eaglefeather, lashing his tail.

Still, neither Whispersong nor Bumblefrost spoke.

"WELL?" Sparktail growled. "Answer them! Are you or are you not having kits?"

Whispersong sat taller, breathing heavily and nervously. "I am."

"Bumblefrost's?" Clovertail muttered bitterly, her black fur bristling.

"Yes," Whispersong spat back.

"You... you," Rustypelt sputtered, shaking with fury. "I never thought it could get any worse! You have disgraced me, your mother, your Clan, everything! You fox-heart!"

Bumblefrost stepped closer to Whispersong, hissing in warning, but Rustypelt ignored it.

"Rustypelt—" Eveningstar began with a growl.

But Rustypelt cut him off. "You are no longer my daughter! I will have no association with you anymore! You no longer deserve to be in DawnClan! You're a *traitor*!"

"RUSTYPELT—"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were banished from the Clan! I couldn't care less about what happens to you from now on! You're as good as dead to me! *Dead*!"

Whispersong's anger was replaced by hurt, pain, and terror. Tears beaded in her eyes and her shoulders trembled.

Something snapped inside Echoheart. "Leave her alone!" she snarled, leaping between her sister and her father, and ignoring Eveningstar. Rustypelt had gone too far.

"Get out of my way, Echoheart," Rustypelt growled quietly, a haunted focus in his eyes. "You should be on my side. Your sister has betrayed you! She doesn't deserve to be here!"

"I said l*eave her alone*!" Echoheart snarled, teeth bared and ears flat. "I don't care what your reasons are! No one deserves to be treated like you just treated her!"

Rustypelt bared his teeth and unsheathed his claws, hissing.

"RUSTYPELT!" Eveningstar snarled, eyeing Rustypelt, Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost in anger. "Leave those three alone. Now."

"I hope you turn to crowfood," Rustypelt spat, staring at Whispersong and Bumblefrost, then he whipped around in shoved his way to the warriors' den, leaving the rest of the Clan stiff with shock.

"You do realize how much damage you've done to DawnClan, don't you?" Eveningstar growled, turning to Whispersong and Bumblefrost with narrowed eyes.

Whispersong was crying now. "I know. I don't know what... what to do anymore. I'll leave. He was right. I... I don't deserve to be here anymore."

"Yes you do!" Echoheart insisted.

"No..." Whispersong whimpered. "I don't."

"Yes, Whispersong, you do," Sparrowtail spoke up, looking sadly at Whispersong and Bumblefrost. "A moon ago I would have never even thought about trusting Bumblefrost, but he has proven himself in my eyes. Of course, it's up to Eveningstar, but I think you both deserve to be here. Yes, you've both broken the warrior code multiple times, but you've shown us how powerful love is, that it has no borders, that it can shape the very forest around us. And

you're bringing new life to this Clan, which will be as quick-witted and strong as DawnClan, and as swift and cunning as DayClan." Sparrowtail spoke louder, turning to the cats around her. "Being half-Clan doesn't matter; being a purely-blooded warrior of your Clan doesn't matter; Rainstar was pure DayClan, and she was one of the most tyrannous cats we've known. The birth of a cat has no effect on what they grow to be, and that's what's important: loyalty, not blood."

Echoheart smiled sadly. Whispersong blinked warmly at Sparrowtail, at a loss for words.

"But without our blood ties we wouldn't even be DawnClan!" Spruceclaw yowled angrily.

Lots of cats around Spruceclaw nodded in agreement.

"No, without our *loyalty* to each other we aren't DawnClan, not because of blood," Rayclaw meowed loudly, tail lashing. "We are a Clan because of our loyalty and trust in each other, because of our promise to protect and defend this Clan with our lives!"

Sunfur nodded. "Rayclaw's right. But," she growled, "you have broken the warrior code, and what's a Clan without following the warrior code?"

Eveningstar sighed. "Yes, and out of justice and fairness, you must be punished."

"Good," Sparktail muttered, gritting her teeth and narrowing her eyes.

"I can't favor you over others who made the same mistake." Eveningstar blinked. "Whispersong, you will be confined to camp until I see fit. Bumblefrost, no patrols; you can only leave camp if you have mine or Sunfur's permission, and you can take over some of the apprentice duties. You can work that out with the apprentices' mentors."

Whispersong nodded wordlessly, accepting Eveningstar's words, tears still dripping off her whiskers. Bumblefrost dipped his head,

eyes narrowed as he stared at his paws, and Echoheart could tell he was angry.

"That's just the way it has to be," Eveningstar stated flatly.

"I understand," Bumblefrost muttered, still staring determinedly at his paws.

"And Whispersong," Eveningstar added, "don't worry about Rustypelt and Sparktail. Every cat makes mistakes and every cat must learn to forgive and forget. Your father is tied to the warrior code, stronger than others, and he doesn't want to accept that his own kit would break the warrior code; he may never truly forgive you, and you must accept that it's because of a choice *you* made, not a choice *he* made."

Whispersong nodded with a sob, staring at the ground.

Eveningstar padded slowly away, Sunfur, Bronzepelt, and Twilightfoot behind. Soon the rest of the cats started dispersing back across the snowy camp, still tense from the argument.

Whispersong shakily turned to Echoheart. "Thank you."

"I told you, I'll always be here for you. We're sisters. We'll get through anything and everything together," Echoheart murmured, touching her nose to her sister's. "And I'm sorry I reacted the way I did about your kits. Sparrowtail is right. Their being half-Clan won't matter. I bet they'll be wonderful assets to DawnClan."

Whispersong smiled weakly but warmly. She said nothing, but her eyes told it all.

Star padded toward them, eyes pooling with sadness. "I'm sorry," she murmured, briefly touching her nose to Whispersong's silver pelt. Whispersong looked at her with misty eyes. Star's one blue and one green eye were round with sympathy. "I never knew how complicated things were in the Clans; I always thought you two were just meant for each other," she sighed. "I had no idea it was forbidden love. You didn't deserve that."

Whispersong sniffled, blinking tears from her eyes. She leaned

against Bumblefrost's shoulder, still shaking from what Rustypelt had said to her. Echoheart never imagined that those words could come from their father's mouth. She'd never imagined he would want to hurt his daughter like that. Where had the father gone who had cheered the loudest at all of hers and Whispersong's ceremonies? The one who had said he'd be proud of them no matter what? The one who'd said that they would always be his kits, and he could never love them less?

Echoheart sighed. *What just happened? And what will happen now?*

Chapter 8

Whispersong opened her eyes wearily. She was lying in the nursery. Sparrowtail, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost had suggested that she move into the nursery instead of sleeping back the warriors' den, especially after yesterday. Whispersong sighed. She felt out of place being back in the nursery; this time not as a kit, but the one having kits. But Whispersong wasn't complaining. Sleeping in the nursery meant she could get away from all the warriors, because most of them hated her now, or at least didn't want to be around her.

Whispersong's heart throbbed again as she remembered what Rustypelt had said to her yesterday: *'I couldn't care less about what happens to you! You're as good as dead to me! Dead!'* Her stomach clenched painfully and her throat felt even dryer.

"Whispersong?"

Whispersong turned, misty-eyed, toward the small, quiet voice. It was Lilackit.

"Are you okay?" The tortoiseshell she-kit asked, light yellow eyes round with concern.

Whispersong sniffled. Did Lilackit even know what Rustypelt had said to her yesterday? Did she even know how much she'd been through? What she was going through now?

"I'm fine," she murmured shortly.

"I sort of like Bumblefrost, even though he was DayClan," Lilackit murmured thoughtfully, yellow eyes round with sadness. "The others were *evil*, but he's not so bad."

Whispersong tried to smile, but her jaw didn't seem to be working.

Lilackit blinked, then turned and left the den, leaving Whispersong alone. Whispersong squeezed her eyes shut tight as another wave of

pain engulfed her, not physical pain from her kits, but emotional pain. Her father's words hurt more than any physical pain she'd ever experienced.

The den entrance rustled again, and Whispersong turned to see Echoheart peering inside. "How are you feeling?"

Whispersong tried to talk, but only a muffled noise came out, and her eyes misted again.

Echoheart looked pained at Whispersong's pain. Her deep blue eyes were round with sympathy, and her usually-sleek gray and tan tabby fur was matted. "They'll... they'll get better. You'll see."

"Yeah right," Whispersong choked.

Echoheart sighed. "Come on, let's get you something to eat."

Whispersong looked at her paws. "They won't let me."

"I'll let you."

Whispersong blinked, still hesitant.

"Come on," her sister urged quietly.

Whispersong nodded, then heaved herself weakly to her paws, her heavy heart weighing her down.

She stepped outside the nursery, blinking away the brightness. The clear blue sky shone above her, and a brisk leaf-bare breeze tugged at her fur. She shivered, then followed her sister carefully across the clearing.

Whispersong avoided every cat's eyes, not wanting to see their disappointment. She could tell every cat was staring at her, and self-consciously, she walked faster.

When they reached the fresh-kill pile after what seemed like forever, Whispersong secluded herself into the shadows, where her Clanmates were less likely to see her.

Echoheart dropped a finch at Whispersong's paws. "We can share this."

Whispersong nodded, words still not forming. She took a slow bite of her meal, hardly tasting it. She felt numb, and she didn't think she'd ever heal from the events of yesterday.

Whispersong nervously looked up and scanned the camp. Eaglefeather was talking to Sunfur, looked annoyed. The elders were shaking their heads in anger, while Cherrykit and Lilackit sat beside Needlepaw, Rosepaw, and Pinepaw, whispering amongst themselves.

I bet they're all talking about me, Whispersong thought sadly.

Echoheart passed the finch back to her, and Whispersong took another bite distractedly, watching her Clanmates with grief and regret. They didn't feel much like her Clanmates anymore. The only cats she truly felt she could trust were Echoheart, Bumblefrost, Star, and Sparrowtail. Yes, Echoheart and Sparrowtail had argued with her recently, but they'd never wavered in their loyalty; they had proved that yesterday by standing up for her when Rustypelt turned his back on her.

"I think Eveningstar is holding Lilackit's and Cherrykit's apprentice ceremony today," Echoheart meowed brightly, staring at the two she-kits in excitement.

Whispersong sighed. "Oh." She knew that Echoheart was going to mentor one of them; Whispersong was *supposed* to mentor the other, but now that she was having kits, she couldn't. Now she wouldn't get to experience being a mentor with her sister, like they had planned since they were little.

Echoheart looked at Whispersong with sympathy. "I bet you'll get another apprentice one day," she murmured uncomfortably.

"Huh," muttered Whispersong, not wanting to talk about it.

Echoheart blinked. "But think about it: you're having kits! You'll be contributing to the Clan not by mentoring an apprentice, but by

giving the Clan the next generation of warriors! Yours and Bumblefrost's kits will be the strongest warriors of DawnClan, you'll see; like Sparrowtail said: it doesn't matter that they're half-Clan. It really doesn't."

"I guess," Whispersong sighed, though she personally didn't agree with her sister. It *did* matter that her kits would be half-Clan, not to Whispersong and Bumblefrost, but to the rest of DawnClan and to the other Clans as well. Her kits would carry the weight of their parents' mistake for their entire lives... Whispersong sighed and shook the thought away. Maybe she'd talk to Bumblefrost about it; maybe he'd understand. She glanced around the camp, then blinked in confusion. Where *was* Bumblefrost? "Do you know where Bumblefrost is?" Whispersong asked Echoheart.

Echoheart looked around the camp. "No. I haven't seen him all morning."

"You haven't?"

Echoheart shook her head. "He's probably out in the forest, taking a walk to get his mind off of yesterday."

Whispersong nodded, worry building inside her. What if he ran into trouble?

"Look, there's Eveningstar, probably to call the Clan meeting," Echoheart meowed eagerly. Whispersong looked up and saw the sleek gray-flecked fur of the Clan leader reflecting in the sunlight as he sat atop the High-stone, breath billowing from his mouth in the cold.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!" he yowled.

Whispersong didn't want to gather beneath the High-stone. She'd be too close to all her Clanmates, and her parents, who still hated her.

"Come on," Echoheart pleaded, seeing Whispersong's look. "You can sit in the back!"

Whispersong shook her head. "I'll stay here; I can hear just fine."

"Okay," Echoheart sighed, padding away. She sat beside Clovertail, Hailstorm, Rayclaw, and Yellowflower, looking up at Eveningstar.

Whispersong watched as Cherrykit and Lilackit squirmed beside each other while Bronzepelt and Sagetail tried to groom them. The two young she-cats bounced away from their parents, toward their older brother.

"I'm nervous," Lilackit meowed.

Rayclaw laughed. "Don't be."

"Yes, you'll be getting your apprentice names!" Clovertail purred beside him.

"*I'm* not nervous!" Cherrykit exclaimed, puffing out her red fur. She quickly licked it back down, green eyes glowing.

Every cat was now gathered around the High-stone, except Bumblefrost, who was still nowhere to be seen. Eveningstar raised his voice again. "As you all know, two of our kits have reached their sixth moon, and it's time they were apprenticed. Cherrykit, Lilackit, come up here."

Cherrykit sprang up and pranced to the base of the High-stone, Lilackit close behind. The two leapt swiftly up on top of the lichen-covered boulder, one after the other.

Eveningstar turned to face Cherrykit. Cherrykit sat even taller, her red pelt glowing in the sunlight. "Cherrykit, from this day forth," Eveningstar meowed, "until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Cherrypaw. And your mentor will be Echoheart."

Echoheart squirmed in excitement, and, as Whispersong watched with jealousy and longing, she jumped up onto the High-stone beside her new apprentice.

"You received exceptional training from Bronzepelt," Eveningstar meowed to Echoheart, "and I expect you to pass all you learned to your new apprentice." Echoheart lifted her chin in pride, then bent over and rested her muzzle on Cherrypaw's head. Cherrypaw licked her new mentor's shoulder eagerly, nearly bouncing into Echoheart

in her eagerness.

Eveningstar now turned to Lilackit. "Lilackit, from this day forth, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Lilacpaw. Your mentor will be Sunfur."

Lilacpaw beamed. The deputy leapt up beside Eveningstar, her orange-brown fur sleek.

"You had received excellent training from Fogtail, and I expect you to pass on all you know to your new apprentice," Eveningstar finished.

Sunfur dipped her head, then turned and rested her muzzle on Lilacpaw's head.

The two new apprentices turned away from Eveningstar and faced the Clan again, their parents and older brother leading the chant.

"Lilacpaw! Cherrypaw!"

Whispersong joined in quietly, not even looking at the two new apprentices. She was watching Echoheart, chest puffed out as she sat behind her apprentice. Her sister was a mentor now, and Whispersong was just a nursery queen.

Whispersong dragged herself back to the nursery with a heavy heart as Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw clambered down the High-stone to meet their Clanmates, who were congratulating them.

Like they once congratulated me... Whispersong thought hopelessly.

She glanced over her shoulder just before she entered the den, eyes misting as she stared at the warm faces of her Clanmates as they looked at the two new apprentices. Would they ever look at her that way again, like they supported her, trusted her, and were proud of her? Was she ever going to be the same in their eyes again?

Whispersong turned away as a cold tear slid down her cheek, and her heart ached painfully. She didn't think so.

* * *

It was way past moonhigh, and Whispersong lay in her nest, wide awake, the near-full moon shining amongst the stars.

It had been a quarter-moon since Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw had been apprenticed, and Whispersong had hardly left the nursery. Bumblefrost visited her occasionally, but most of the time he was out of the camp, to get away from DawnClan, Whispersong supposed. She wished she could do the same, but she was confined to camp.

Whispersong sighed and stared outside the den, reminiscing about the time before they'd left for the mountains; before, when she was loved and supported by all of her Clanmates, when she and her sister could spend all day out in the forest together, when she and Bumblefrost were just young, playful apprentices; before, when she had felt at home. Now she felt outcasted, alone, unloved, unwanted.

Whispersong sighed inwardly, closing her eyes.

"Mother?"

Whispersong blinked her eyes back open as one of Meadowheart's kits spoke, and she turned her head. They were actually getting big quickly, even though they were born nearly a moon ago.

"Yes?" Meadowheart yawned, eyes heavy with sleep.

"Is... she okay?" the tiny light brown tom-kit murmured, and Whispersong knew he was referring to her.

Meadowheart sighed, and Whispersong pretended to be asleep. "Yes, Cricketkit, I think so." There was a pause. "Pollenkit! Get back here!" Meadowheart hissed.

"I'm making sure she's not dead!" The tiny black tom-kit murmured.

"She's not," Meadowheart snapped.

"Is she in the Clan?" Cricketkit whispered.

"Yes, she's in our Clan," Meadowheart sighed. "But she's changed. She used to be so much more lively, more loyal, and less...

impulsive... before you were born. If you had known her then, you'd have loved her. She was so kind, and determined to help her Clan. The old Whispersong would have never stooped as low as she has... having a DayClan cat's kits..." Meadowheart added, muttering to herself as if she couldn't believe it.

Whispersong's heart ached sadly. Had she really changed *that* much?

The other two kits, Pansykit and Acornkit, were silent, and Whispersong could tell they were staring at her.

"Let's get back to bed," Meadowheart whispered. Whispersong heard scuttling as Meadowheart's four kits lied down beside her, and, after a little bit, the den quieted down again as they all fell back asleep.

Whispersong lay awake much longer, her mind wandering to the past. When sleep finally overtook her, the den was engulfed in the light rosy glow of dawn.

The camp began to stir, but Whispersong slept on. Through the dark, gray shadows, the large shape of a cat slunk through the bushes and left the camp. No cat knew where the cat was going, nor did they care.

But they should have cared.

* * *

"Hey."

Whispersong turned groggily as Bumblefrost entered the nursery. Meadowheart and her kits were no longer in the den; it was just Whispersong, alone, again.

"Where've you been?" Whispersong murmured, yawning.

"Out in the forest." Bumblefrost shrugged.

"Hunting?" Whispersong could smell prey on him.

"No."

Whispersong blinked. "Oh."

"I'm not allowed on hunting patrols remember?" Bumblefrost muttered stiffly.

"Yeah, I know," Whispersong narrowed her eyes, sitting up, "then why do you smell like fresh-kill? Did you eat?"

Bumblefrost continued to stare outside the den. "No. I don't take fresh-kill from their stupid pile. I hunt for myself, and myself only," he muttered.

Whispersong blinked in confusion; Bumblefrost wasn't acting normal. "But you just said you didn't go hunting."

"I... did yesterday," Bumblefrost muttered.

"Oh."

There was a pause. Whispersong stared at Bumblefrost, who still had his eyes fixed on something outside the den, and she tried to read his expression.

Whispersong sighed. "Well, if you haven't hunted or eaten since yesterday, you must be hungry, so why don't we get a piece of fresh-kill and share it? If you brought it here we could share—"

"I *told* you, I don't take fresh-kill from their fox-dunged fresh-kill pile. I refuse to be dependent on your mouse-brained Clanmates. I get my own prey."

Whispersong narrowed her eyes, puzzled at Bumblefrost's behavior. "How about this one time? Please, Bumblefrost. I haven't eaten with you in ages, but... I don't want to leave the den; I don't want to remind them of what I did. If y—"

"Well, now you know how I felt," Bumblefrost growled, still staring outside the den. "You just need to face up to them and get the prey you want. You act like having out kits is a burden, a mistake! How will you treat the kits once they're born? You can't let your dumb, stuck-up Clanmates order you around. What's done is done and they can't do anything about it, so you better stop feeling sorry for

yourself and just accept it!"

Whispersong flinched, and her eyes misted; it was like Rustypelt all over again. "Look who's talking!" Whispersong snapped. "All you've done the in past quarter-moon is leave the camp and avoid the Clan, and avoid *me*! And now you're getting angry at me; you've never been angry with me!" Tears raked down her cheeks. "What's gotten into you?"

There was a silence, then Bumblefrost sighed deeply. All his anger faded and was replaced with, was that guilt? "I don't know," Bumblefrost murmured. "I'm just worried."

"Me too!" Whispersong muttered stiffly. "But that doesn't explain why you've acted different lately. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing. I'm... I'm just stressed right now. It'll work itself out."

"I hope so." Whispersong grunted, eyeing Bumblefrost next to her. There was definitely something he wasn't telling her.

Chapter 9

Echoheart stared at the full moon straight above her head.

The last few days had drug past at a snail's pace, and Whispersong still hadn't emerged from the nursery. Bumblefrost was still leaving the camp regularly, though Echoheart didn't know why, and no one seemed to notice or care. Echoheart didn't question him; she guessed he was probably trying to avoid scornful comments from the DawnClan cats and get his mind off of things away from the camp, and Echoheart couldn't blame him.

Echoheart sighed and pulled her gaze from the moon above. The Gathering was tonight, and it was going to start very soon. Eveningstar had already taken the DawnClan Gathering patrol, and they were probably at the Pointed Mountain by now. Star had been chosen; she had looked really nervous, but Eveningstar had encouraged her, and eventually she was walking proudly beside her new Clanmates to her first Gathering. Cherrypaw had been disappointed that she and Lilacpaw couldn't go, but Echoheart had assured her that one moon soon she'd be going too. Lilacpaw had been relieved, saying that if they had been chosen, they'd have to see the very DayClan cats who'd kidnapped them and imprisoned them in their camp, and she was glad she wasn't going.

Echoheart sighed. *I should get to bed*, she thought, glancing up again at the star- splotched sky. She got to her paws, shivered in the cold breeze, then padded to the warriors' den.

Echoheart paused as she passed by the nursery, realizing that she should visit Whispersong. She hadn't seen her sister the past few days; Echoheart had been on many, many patrols and rarely had time to visit her anymore. She was starting to suspect that Eveningstar and her parents were trying to keep her away from Whispersong.

Like that'll do anything! Echoheart scoffed. *I'll see my sister when I want to see her, and they can't stop me!*

Echoheart poked her head inside the nursery. "Whispersong?"

No answer.

"Whispersong?"

"Shush!" hissed a voice. It was Meadowheart. "Kits are trying to sleep!"

"Sorry," Echoheart whispered, sighing. She turned away toward the warriors' den, deciding that she'd try to talk to her sister in the morning.

"Wait! Echoheart!"

Echoheart turned.

Whispersong was hobbling from the nursery, silver tabby pelt glistening in the moonlight. "Did you call me?"

"Yeah, but if you were sleeping, you could have just stayed there. I'd have just seen you in the morning," Echoheart murmured quietly. She knew her sister wasn't getting much sleep these days.

"You might not see me in the morning," Whispersong yawned. "Sunfur might put you on another patrol to get you away from me."

"You see it too? That they're trying to keep us apart?"

"Yeah." Whispersong snorted, then her eyes sunk with sadness, and Echoheart knew what she was thinking.

"It's their fault for not accepting what has happened," Echoheart meowed in her sister's defense. "They're the ones making you feel awful! This is *your* Clan as much as it is theirs! True, you broke the warrior code like, three or so times—"

"—Oh, more than that!"

"But you're still one of us, Whispersong. You need to stick up for yourself and your own decisions!"

"But my kits... they'll be half-Clan; their father is from *DayClan*! And I'm slowly being outcasted from DawnClan... not to even mention that the prophecy is going to unfold soon! We're supposed to save all four Clans! How in the name of StarClan are we supposed to do that if we can't even get our own Clan to trust us? They definitely won't trust *me*!"

"But they need you, Whispersong! *I* need you! 'With the whispering voice of *two!*' not the whispering voice of one! If they can't trust both of us Two, the Clans will be destroyed!"

"But... Oh, Echoheart! My life's falling apart! My world is crumbling around me! I don't know what to think, or feel, or *do* anymore! And don't tell me it'll work out, because I'm starting to think that it won't! Why did StarClan choose me? I'm worthless!"

"No you're not!" Echoheart snapped. "You're my sister! And I'll defend you for as long as I live, no matter what any other cat says, even our parents or our own leader! We *will* work this out; we *have* to Whispersong. We are the Two. And remember," Echoheart murmured fiercely, staring into her sister's dull brown eyes. "You are not alone."

* * *

Echoheart sat beside Clovertail in the early morning light, sharing a mouse. The breeze was cold and sharp, tugging sharply at their fur. Clouds hung over the forest, threatening to dump snow.

"Hey, Echoheart!" It was Cherrypaw. "Are we going training today?"

"I think so," Echoheart replied with a deep sigh, teeth chattering.

"Good!" Cherrypaw squealed, trotting away toward Lilacpaw to tell her the good news.

Echoheart blinked again. It felt weird being a mentor, and to be in charge of another cat. She was used to it being the other way around. It didn't seem that long ago that she had been out in the forest as an apprentice herself and training with Bronzepelt.

Echoheart suddenly remembered; last night had been the Gathering,

and she hadn't asked any cat what had happened yet. She turned to Clovertail. "You went to the Gathering last night, didn't you?"

Clovertail nodded grimly.

"What happened?" Echoheart asked worriedly.

"Lots of stuff, and none of it is good news," Clovertail murmured. "Well, I suppose there is a bit of good news: Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw were announced as full NightClan warriors: Flowersong and Rippleclaw."

Echoheart nodded.

"That was all the news for NightClan, and basically the only good news. Next Nettlestar spoke. First she said that one of their elders, Patchnose, or something, was getting weak with a new-leaf cough, and she told the other leaders to watch out for it in case it spread." Clovertail paused for many heartbeats. "But then she.... well, she announced that Flamethorn and Emberclaw disappeared about a half-moon ago."

Echoheart widened her eyes. "They *disappeared*?"

Clovertail nodded. "Nettlestar thinks they ran away to join Rainstar. She said that the day after Emberclaw and Flamethorn left, one of her patrols scented Rainstar by the river, and that's where Flamethorn's and Emberclaw's scent-trails disappeared."

Echoheart blinked. "So now we have three rogue DayClan cats out there."

"And NightClan said all three of them were scented by the Thunderpath a few days ago."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes. "By *NightClan* territory? How have they been going that far, through Clan territory, without being spotted?"

Clovertail shook her head and sighed. "I don't know, but it's suspicious and not good."

"Anything to do with Rainstar isn't good, especially now that she's been reunited with her two loyal kits," Echoheart muttered bitterly. "She's probably planning to do something again, something evil, like last time." She shuddered, remembering what Whispersong had said to her on that patrol a half-moon ago: that Whispersong knew Rainstar had another plan.

"Yeah, but hopefully if she does, it'll be to DayClan only, because they drove her out. She'll want revenge on them."

"Yeah, but... but wouldn't she want revenge on all four Clans? DayClan, obviously; NightClan for Lightningkit; DawnClan for Stormpaw probably and planning the attack on her camp; DuskClan... DuskClan for just uniting with us against her, I suppose..." she sighed. "She and the rest of DayClan always *were* talking about revenge and whatnot."

Clovertail shrugged, looking troubled.

"So what else happened?"

The black she-cat let out a long sigh. "Freezepaw from DuskClan has died."

"That new apprentice?"

Clovertail nodded.

"How'd she die?" Echoheart exclaimed, stomach sinking.

"I don't know; DuskClan didn't say, but I don't think they knew. It's... weird. Orangestar said that she was murdered: torn apart, with blood pooling around her... bones protruding, and... and she was hardly recognizable. Her... back end was gone."

Echoheart's stomach convulsed in disgust and horror. She felt like she was about to throw up.

"It's awful." Clovertail bowed her head.

"But..." Echoheart restrained herself from gagging and vomiting. "But how? How could they not figure out what did that to her? I

mean, there had to be a scent or some—"

"They couldn't find a scent. They said the scent of blood and... and rot was too strong."

Echoheart could taste her previous meal in her throat, and she willed herself not to vomit.

"Lots of cats immediately thought it was Rainstar, because she'd been scented near DuskClan a few days before Freezepaw was killed, and because she wants revenge on all the Clans, like you said," Clovertail sighed.

Echoheart didn't dare open her mouth. She forcefully swallowed her meal back down.

"Yeah..." Clovertail sighed, glaring at the ground in disgust. "Then Eveningstar said DawnClan's news, and..."

"Did he announce that Whispersong and I are back?" Echoheart asked, her stomach doing a nervous flip.

Clovertail nodded. "He said that you two had finally returned, and when cats asked why you'd left in the first place, he'd said that was something you two alone would share. But he did say you were sent by StarClan."

"And did the other Clans believe it?"

"Not really."

"Of course they didn't."

"He also announced that you'd brought back one of the cats you'd met with while on your journey, and Star looked absolutely terrified to be announced in front of all four Clans, even though Eveningstar told her before that it would happen."

"Well, she hadn't even been around that many cats before," Echoheart reasoned.

Clovertail nodded. "Yeah; Eveningstar told them that her own

ancestors had sent her dreams, and that had led her to the conclusion to come back with you. Cats were shocked. Some yelled that Eveningstar was a traitor, some were disappointed, some were curious. But most were confused at *why* she had come to the Clans with you two." Clovertail sighed. "But Star stayed strong and didn't snap at any of them when they told her how much she didn't belong."

"Well, she's never been the cat to do that anyway," Echoheart meowed.

"I admire her," Clovertail murmured. "She's a good cat. Even if she comes from outside the Clans. I think she could become a great warrior with the proper training."

Echoheart nodded, thinking of what sister would say: *"What about Bumblefrost? He's from outside DawnClan too, and you all don't trust him!"* Echoheart sighed; she didn't know how Bumblefrost would be trusted if he and Whispersong were having kits together. *Echoheart* trusted him, but other cats definitely didn't.

Echoheart turned back to Clovertail. "Was that it?"

"Well... no."

"What *else* happened?"

"Songtail... Songtail spoke up afterward, and Nettlestar was disappointed at her interruption, but she let her speak anyway."

"What'd she say?" Echoheart whispered, having a feeling that it was about her brother, Bumblefrost.

"She said that she knew that you two had returned with another cat, a fourth cat, even though it was implied that only three returned," Clovertail sighed.

Echoheart's stomach sank. Yep, it was about Bumblefrost.

"She said, 'I know those two DawnClan cats left with my brother, so where is he now?' Some cat from DawnClan, I think it was Sparrowtail, pointed out that at a few Gatherings ago Songtail had

said that Bumblefrost wasn't her brother and that she'd drive him out because he was a traitor. Songtail got really angry and told every cat, who was whispering around her, to shut up. Nettlestar got furious and told off Songtail, but she told her leader that she had to speak, and Nettlestar let her, though I really don't think she wanted to; I just don't think she wanted an argument during the truce of the full moon."

Echoheart's heart pounded. She could picture Songtail's face, and the faces of the shocked cats around her as if she had been there last night too.

Clovertail continued. "Songtail wanted to know how DawnClan was treating him. She wanted to know if he, a traitor, was welcome in DawnClan. Some other DawnClan cat, I don't know who, I couldn't really hear them, growled at Songtail saying it that was none of her business. She said she knew it wasn't, but she warned that Bumblefrost could be dangerous because no cat could never tell where his loyalties were, and that he should be driven from DawnClan immediately." Clovertail sighed. "I saw your parents, a few other DawnClan cats, and some cats from the other three Clans nodding at what Songtail had said."

Echoheart felt anger bubbling inside her. Since when did her parents ever agree with what Songtail said, or any DayClan cat for that matter? *It's just because Whispersong is Bumblefrost's mate and is having his kits*, she growled to herself.

"I heard Rustypelt," Clovertail meowed, "on the way back home, saying to Eveningstar that we should get rid of Bumblefrost immediately. But Eveningstar told him that they had to keep an eye on him, and keeping him in DawnClan would be the best way to do that."

A low growl rumbled in Echoheart's throat. "Why is DawnClan falling apart? Rustypelt was never unreasonable like this, was he?"

"It's only been since you got home with Bumblefrost and Star," Clovertail muttered.

"I know that," Echoheart snapped. "But why can't they just accept

him? Then he'd be nicer and more loyal back!"

"You do have to understand that Eveningstar and most other cats are just worried that he'll do something to badly affect Dawn—"

"I've heard this talk a million times, Clovertail, and I understand, but tell me: why then did you all trust Stormpaw so quickly? Huh?"

"We were desperate to save Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw," Clovertail sighed. "Believe me, it wasn't easy. And anyways, I thought you didn't trust Bumblefrost for a while either!"

Echoheart snorted. "During the journey to the mountains he saved my life twice, he fought beside me, and he stood by us the entire time! What else will it take to prove to you that Bumblefrost is loyal?"

"See, you had *moons* to start trusting him, he's only been in DawnClan for one moon!"

"But he's been hunting for you, doing everything the other warriors have told him—"

"Not lately," Clovertail muttered.

"But that's because he and Whispersong are having kits, so he's outcasted and being treated awfully again. He's tried to be nice, but wouldn't it be hard to be nice to a bunch of cats who are so rude back to you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But what?" Echoheart interrupted. "He's really trying to be a good cat, but how can he when all the cats hate him?"

"DawnClan won't change the way they feel about him, I'm afraid." Clovertail sighed.

"Oh, but they can change their minds about *Stormpaw*? If they can change their minds about *Rainstar's daughter*, then I'm pretty sure they can change their minds about an ordinary DayClan cat!"

"We'll see," Clovertail sighed again, avoiding Echoheart's eyes.

Echoheart scowled. Why was this so complicated?

* * *

Echoheart padded wearily beside Eaglefeather, Sparrowtail, and Star. The forest glowed orange as the sun set to their right. She was exhausted from taking Cherrypaw training, like she had promised.

"Eveningstar told me to remind you to check out the borders for Rainstar's scent," Star meowed to Sparrowtail, catching up to her. "Because that's the most likely spot the outcasted DayClan cats would travel to get between territories."

"Right," Sparrowtail nodded. "First we're heading to the far border, toward the sunset."

"The one DawnClan doesn't share with any other Clan?" Star murmured.

"Yeah." Eaglefeather nodded.

Echoheart's stomach flipped over. The far border was where she had found Whispersong on an evening patrol a half-moon ago, with Rainstar's scent all around her. Whispersong had later told Echoheart that she had passed out, because she had realized she was expecting kits; which had meant that while Whispersong was unconscious, Rainstar had found her, walked around her, probably even *touched* her. Echoheart shuddered. So Rainstar definitely knew that they were back from the mountains, and from that she probably found out that Bumblefrost was back in the forest as well. But that information couldn't hurt, could it? What did she care about Echoheart or Whispersong being back? Maybe she did care about Bumblefrost being back, because by leaving he had betrayed DayClan... But Rainstar couldn't do anything about that! Could she?

Echoheart felt a jab in her side and jerked her head. "What?" she exclaimed, staring at Star, who she guessed had been the one to nudge her.

Star nodded her head toward Sparrowtail, and Echoheart followed

her gaze.

"Right, Echoheart?" Sparrowtail asked, staring at her.

"Right what?"

"This border is the border where we first scented Rainstar, right?"

"Oh, yes it was." Echoheart nodded, feeling bad that she hadn't heard Sparrowtail the first time. She sighed and told herself she was going to put *all* of her focus on the patrol, so she blocked all other thoughts from entering her mind.

As they neared the border, the fur on the back of Echoheart's neck bristled. Would they scent Rainstar again, but stronger, and with Emberclaw and Flamethorn now? Were they lurking on the border?

"Keep quiet, for a precaution," Sparrowtail whispered, placing her paws lightly on the soaked leaves and dead plants underpaw. Eaglefeather's ears were pricked, and Star's eyes were wide. Echoheart followed last, glancing behind them every now and then.

Then Star stopped. "Smell that?"

Eaglefeather sniffed the air. "Yes."

"Smell what?" Echoheart asked. She sniffing the air, but all she could smell was damp wood and melting snow.

"DayClan!" Star exclaimed.

"That's definitely Rainstar," Sparrowtail muttered bitterly.

Echoheart walked toward them, then sniffed the air again. Rainstar. "I smell it now too. But it smells old and faint."

"It does," Eaglefeather murmured, lowering his muzzle to the dirt.

"There's another few scents, cat-scents, mixed in with Rainstar's. I don't know who, but I smell them," Star murmured beside Eaglefeather, tail twitching.

"Flamethorn and Emberclaw I think, but I can't be sure," Eaglefeather murmured.

Echoheart blinked. She didn't recognize the scents, they were too faint and jumbled together to pick out individual cat-scents.

"There's something else, *someone* else; I smell a fourth scent!" Star exclaimed. "It... seems familiar."

Sparrowtail smelled the ground. "I don't recognize it, but I feel like I should."

Echoheart sniffed the ground, curious. She blinked. She smelled it, but it didn't seem true. Why would he be here with Rainstar and her kits?

"Bumblefrost?" Star meowed in confusion.

So Star had recognized it too.

"Are you sure?" Sparrowtail gasped.

"I smell it now too, faintly," Eaglefeather murmured.

"What would he be doing with Rainstar?" Sparrowtail growled in confusion.

"It's so old of a smell that I'm pretty sure they were here at different times," Star meowed.

"Oh good," Echoheart murmured to herself.

"Well then he was bound to smell this!"

"He probably did and was trying to figure out why they were near DawnClan," Echoheart reasoned.

"Or he was trying to find Rainstar to join her," Eaglefeather growled.

"Don't be stupid," Echoheart snapped. "Bumblefrost would never do that. I've known him long enough to know that."

"I trust your word, Echoheart," Sparrowtail meowed bitterly. "But this still should arouse suspicion in your mind."

"It did, then we realized the explanation," Echoheart retorted.

"Bumblefrost does not seem the type to ever do anything like that," Star spoke up.

"Yes, I don't think that's the case," Sparrowtail meowed, "but we can ask him tomorrow."

Echoheart nodded.

"Let's get going then," Eaglefeather meowed, staring at the sun disappearing through the trees. "We still need to check the rest of the borders."

Sparrowtail nodded, quickly remarked the scent-markers where Rainstar's scent was, then turned away from the border and the setting sun. Star trotted after her, and Eaglefeather followed. Echoheart picked up her pace, and followed her Clanmates toward the river's edge and DayClan's border.

While Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather went to riverbank and investigated the scent-markers, Star held back and turned to Echoheart. "Echoheart," she whispered, looking around to make sure they weren't being overhead. "I have to tell you and Whispersong something when we get back to camp. It's important."

Echoheart blinked, heart leaping uncomfortably. Was it about the prophecy?

"I know Whispersong doesn't want to leave the nursery, but we need to go somewhere private." Echoheart looked into the silver she-cat's one blue and one green eye, glistening with worry.

"Alright," Echoheart murmured. "If Meadowheart and her kits aren't in the nursery, we can talk in there, but—"

"I doubt Meadowheart and her kits are outside the nursery," Star meowed. "It's after dark, and it's cold out." Echoheart realized Star was right. Meadowheart would have her kits warm inside the

nursery by dark.

"We'll have to go into the dirtplace then," Echoheart sighed, "as long as no cat is in there, or outside it, we won't be overheard. And the colder it gets the more cats will be inside their dens, which increases our chance of privacy."

"We could go outside the camp," Star urged.

"We can't. Whispersong is confined to camp. If she broke her punishment, she'd get into more trouble and lose even more cats' respect. Plus, cats would see us leaving, and they'd be suspicious. If Rustypelt saw us..."

Star sighed. "The dirtplace works then. And I'm sorry, by the way, about your parents. You'll get along again one day."

"I doubt it, but thanks, Star," Echoheart sighed.

"So tonight, wh—" Star began.

"—we smelled Rainstar!"

Echoheart jumped, heart skipping a few beats in fright. Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail were coming up behind them, looking angry.

"You did?" Star asked. "Again?"

Sparrowtail nodded, scowling. "All along the river, on *our* side of the border."

"She's creeping around all the Clans' territories!" Eaglefeather growled. "So she probably did kill Freezepaw! She's using the scent-markers along the borders to hide her scent and to sneak between territories!"

Echoheart growled. "That evil, fox-hearted, dung-face."

"Let's check the NightClan border," Eaglefeather muttered bitterly. "I bet you anything her scent will be along the Thunderpath."

"It'll be harder to track her by the Thunderpath," Echoheart warned.

"But it's worth a try," Sparrowtail muttered.

Echoheart nodded. "Let's go."

Sparrowtail led the way, the darkness growing around them.

***

It had turned out that Rainstar actually hadn't been along the Thunderpath. But that didn't mean she wasn't going to go there next. If she had just been scented on the DuskClan border, as reported at the Gathering, she could very well be making her way toward NightClan.

Echoheart sighed, staring at the ground in front of her nose. Her head lay on her paws, and her eyes flitted to the den entrance, waiting for Star to walk by so she'd know when to get up and go to the dirtplace.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, but it was just Hailstorm shifting beside her, still snoring.

Rustypelt and Sparktail were in the far corner of the den, still avoiding Echoheart but not treating her in any way like they treated Whispersong. Echoheart sighed sadly and angrily. She wanted to get along with her parents again; she didn't like them being mad at her at all. But she couldn't forgive them while they treated Whispersong the way they were.

A silver flash caught the corner or Echoheart's eye, and she turned just in time to see Star walking past.

Echoheart glanced around her; every cat was asleep. She slowly rose to all four paws, stretched, then crept over Hailstorm and exited the warriors' den.

Star was waiting for her beside the dirtplace tunnel, white fur shining silver in the moonlight.

"Did you tell tell Whispersong?" Echoheart whispered.

Star nodded. "But it was hard to wake her up without also waking

up Meadowheart and her kits."

"They didn't wake up, did they?"

"No. And neither did any of the other apprentices as I left the apprentices' den."

"Good," Echoheart murmured. "Who's on guard tonight?"

"Goldheart."

Echoheart was taken by surprise. "Goldheart?"

"Yeah. He said he couldn't sleep, so he took over Sunfur's shift."

"I didn't think he would ever guard."

Star shrugged.

It was several heartbeats later when Whispersong finally emerged from the nursery. She hobbled across the camp as quietly as she could, her belly hanging with the weight of her kits. It struck Echoheart how odd the sight was. She never though, in a thousand seasons, she'd see her sister expecting kits, especially not this early in her life.

"Sorry. Cricketkit woke up whining and crying. I don't know why, but I had to wait until he and Meadowheart fell back asleep before leaving the den," Whispersong panted.

Echoheart blinked. "You don't have to sneak around, you know. You can leave to go to the dirtplace if you need to; any cat can."

"But I didn't want Meadowheart getting suspicious." Whispersong sighed. "I don't know, I just feel like I always have to sneak around these days."

Echoheart blinked in sympathy.

Whispersong sighed again, then turned to Star. "So what did you want to tell us?"

Star stood up. "Come on," she meowed, entering the dirtplace tunnel. Echoheart followed her, Whispersong behind. Star sat down, and Echoheart and Whispersong sat across from her.

Star sighed. "I had a dream. From the Tribe of Endless Hunting and StarClan."

"And StarClan?" Whispersong blinked.

"Yes."

"Was it like the dreams you had in the Tribe?" Echoheart whispered.

Star shook her head. "Not exactly. The same ancestors that were in my previous dreams were in this dream though."

"And the same StarClan warrior?"

Star nodded. "Yes. And more."

"Did you pick up their names?" Echoheart asked. Maybe it was someone she knew.

"I... I think one of them was named Whirl-something. But I don't remember."

"Whirlheart?" Whispersong asked quietly, glancing at Echoheart. Whirlheart had been in Echoheart's and Whispersong's dreams.

"Maybe," Star murmured, deep in thought. Then she added, "I think it was. She mentioned being given a job, and then she traveled across the skies to reach the Tribe of Endless Hunting... anyway, they told me darkness was coming, a darkness that would cast the darkest of shadows upon the forest. They kept repeating phrases with the word darkness in them." Star shuddered. "Then they all, both StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting, started kind of shouting at me things like 'it's your destiny' or 'fulfill your destiny' or 'your time is coming'. I don't know what they meant!" Star shook her head in confusion, eyes filled with worry.

Echoheart and Whispersong shared a bewildered glance, then Echoheart meowed, "It must have been a warning."

"About what? The danger?"

Echoheart shuddered. "I hope not."

"Well, what else could it be?" Whispersong asked. "If it's not about the danger?"

"I don't know, maybe Rainstar's next plan. She did kill that DuskClan apprentice!" Star murmured, shivering.

"Maybe."

"Wait," Whispersong muttered, "this dream, you said they repeated the word darkness a lot, right?"

Star nodded.

"Well," Whispersong continued, "maybe it was similar to Goldheart's darkness dreams."

Echoheart nodded. "Maybe."

"He's on guard tonight. Maybe we can go and ask him," Whispersong suggested.

"Ask Goldheart?" Star whispered.

"Why not? Your dreams sound similar. And he's a medicine cat; he knows how to interpret dreams."

"Alright," Star replied, sighing.

Echoheart led the way out of the dirtplace, Star behind her.

"I'll stay here," Whispersong murmured.

Echoheart turned around. "Why? You can't be ashamed in front of your own Clanmates anymore! And Goldheart isn't the type to make you feel bad for having kits."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, Whispersong."

Whispersong sighed. "Okay."

Echoheart turned around again, walking across the moonlit camp with Whispersong and Star behind her.

Goldheart turned when he heard them approaching. "What are you three all doing awake? It's nearly moonhigh."

Echoheart and Whispersong nodded to Star.

Star took a deep breath. "I... I had a dream, a few nights ago, about an approaching darkness." Goldheart eyes immediately became unfocused and worried. "StarClan cats were there, and so were my ancestors, the Tribe of Endless Hunting. They warned me of... of a coming darkness, darkness that would cast some of the darkest shadows upon the forest."

Goldheart turned to Star, eyes wide with fear. "The ancestors said that to you?"

"Yes," Star nodded, looking more fearful by the heartbeat at Goldheart's expression.

"Mine... mine didn't have any StarClan cats, or any cats, but... I was just stuck in darkness, with blood, pain... something ending it all..." Goldheart breathed, barely audible. It seemed to Echoheart that Goldheart had forgotten that they were here; his orange eyes were wide, unfocused, and unblinking as he stared across the camp.

Echoheart stared at the medicine cat in concern. What did he know that she, Whispersong, or Star didn't?

Then Goldheart turned to Star, and meowed urgently, "Tell me if you have any more of these dreams."

Star nodded, looking even more concerned. "I... I will."

Goldheart nodded wordlessly, then turned back toward the entrance to the camp. Echoheart nudged Whispersong, and then they followed Star back across the camp, leaving Goldheart to guard the camp.

"How many of those dreams has Goldheart had?" Star whispered.

"I don't know, but I know it's been more than twice," Echoheart murmured.

Star blinked. "Well, we'd better get back to bed. Eveningstar is taking me training in the meadow tomorrow and I don't want to be too tired. I'll make sure and tell you if I have another dream."

Echoheart nodded. "Alright. Goodnight, Star."

Star smiled slightly. "Goodnight." Then she turned and padded to the apprentices' den, disappearing inside the heather bush a few moments later.

Echoheart turned to Whispersong. "We'd better get to... get to sleep too," she yawned.

"Are you taking Cherrypaw out training tomorrow?" Whispersong asked, with a hint of envy in her voice.

"I think so. And don't be jealous," she added. "Being a mentor is more exhausting and difficult than I thought, especially with Cherrypaw as an apprentice."

"Yeah, but at least you are training an apprentice," Whispersong murmured.

"You will too. But right now, you have your kits to worry about." Echoheart paused. "How's Bumblefrost been? I haven't talked to him in a while, what with all the stuff I have to do to keep track of Cherrypaw. Plus he always seems to be gone from camp."

Whispersong shrugged and sighed. "He looks stressed. He visits me as often as he can, but Eveningstar keeps him busy around camp. He does some of the apprentices' jobs, and he hunts alone at times too, since he's not allowed on hunting patrols as his punishment. But at least he's not confined to camp."

"Yeah," Echoheart murmured distantly, yawning again. "Well, we'd... we'd better get to sleep." She looked up the slow-waning moon straight above her head, shrinking from the full moon it was

a few nights ago. "It's moonhigh. And I have to be up at a little last dawn tomorrow."

"Alright," Whispersong sighed, looking saddened again. "Goodnight."

Echoheart touched her nose to her sister's ear. "You're not alone, remember."

"I know. I'm just... I'm just worried: about these dreams, and the coming darkness, and the prophecy, and my kits, and my Clanmates hating me, and Bumblefrost being unaccepted, and the bear, and—"

"It'll all work out. You'll see.""I hope so." Whispersong sighed.

Chapter 10

Echoheart leapt over a frozen creek, Cherrypaw prancing beside her despite the chilling weather; the forest was thick with frost, and the low, gray clouds foreshadowed an incoming snowstorm.

Echoheart recalled last night with a shiver. Star's dream still perturbed her, especially since it was similar to Goldheart's dreams of darkness. What was on its way? More killings by Rainstar and her new plan? Or was it the danger finally arriving? Echoheart shuddered. She didn't want either of those things to happen.

"There's the Thunderpath!" Cherrypaw squealed, jerking Echoheart from her thoughts.

"Cherrypaw! Don't go any farther!" Echoheart snarled in fright as Cherrypaw sprinted right toward the hard gray Twoleg path. Cherrypaw skidded to a halt at Echoheart's shouting, tail twitching in curiosity. Echoheart sighed with both relief and annoyance. Her apprentice had only seen the Thunderpath once before; on her tour of DawnClan territory, and she didn't seem to remember that Thunderpaths were deadly. Echoheart padded up to her apprentice and murmured, "Cherrypaw, the Thunderpath is a dangerous, dangerous place, like I said last time we were out here. Cats have been killed by the monsters that speed along it."

"I know," Cherrypaw meowed. "Sagetail told us once when we were kits."

Echoheart nodded. "Anything to do with Twolegs is unpredictable and dangerous."

"I've never seen a Twoleg!" Cherrypaw blurted out.

Echoheart rolled her eyes. Did her apprentice ever listen to anything she said?

"Are they as tall and weird and scary as every cat says they are?"

"Yes," Echoheart replied with a sigh.

"I want to see them for myself!"

"You're mouse-brained to want to see a Twoleg. I'd give up all the prey on the fresh-kill pile to never see another one."

"Oh. Are they really that bad?"

"Yes," Echoheart muttered grimly. Suddenly the loud roaring of a monster filled her ears, and Echoheart hissed, "Cherrypaw, duck!" She crouched low in the tall grass beside the Thunderpath, her belly fur rubbing against the frozen, frosted dirt. Cherrypaw pressed herself against Echoheart, green eyes wide.

"What is it?" Cherrypaw exclaimed.

"A monster. Peek your head through the grass; just your head!"

The roaring echoed across the forest, and Echoheart felt a rush of dust and cold air as the monster sped past. Then its noise faded, just as quickly as it had started. Echoheart sat up in relief as it disappeared.

"*That* was a monster?" Cherrypaw whispered, green eyes wide with awe and fright as she backed out of the tall grass.

"Yes," Echoheart muttered. "They're strange creatures, only sticking to the Twoleg-made Thunderpath. Although, there have been reportings of monsters that have strayed from the Thunderpath, but it's rare." Echoheart shuddered. "Never, ever, underestimate a monster, or *anything* having to do with Twolegs. Got that Cherrypaw?" Echoheart asked sternly.

Cherrypaw nodded vigorously, still staring at the Thunderpath with shocked eyes.

"Good. If there's anything I want you to remember about the Twolegs, it's that."

Cherrypaw nodded. "I got it."

Echoheart blinked. *Good. Now hopefully she* remembers *it*, Echoheart sighed. But at least Cherrypaw looked scared enough to not go near the Thunderpath again.

"Let's go," Echoheart meowed. "We can't train near the Thunderpath."

Cherrypaw nodded, then the small red she-cat turned and bounded after Echoheart.

Echoheart shivered as the wind clawed at her fur. Why had she agreed to go training with Cherrypaw? It was *so* cold...

Cherrypaw raced past her, leaping through the tall grass. She paused. "Come on!" she yowled, standing tall on a frosted log, apparently having already forgotten her fear of seeing the Thunderpath and that monster.

"I'm coming." Echoheart shivered again.

The clouds flew by overhead with the icy wind, brushing the treetops and covering them in a frosty mist. The grass waved violently around them, and the trees creaked overhead.

"Great StarClan, it's cold!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, shaking her thick red pelt and flattening her ears against her head.

"Yeah. The snow's coming in."

"Well, we'd better get to training then!" Cherrypaw purred.

Echoheart laughed. "Alright."

She looked around. They were nearing a clearing, surrounded by tall spruces and pines. Their tall evergreen branches would block some of the wind, which would help keep Echoheart and Cherrypaw warm. *Well, as warm as we can get in this weather*, Echoheart thought.

She paused underneath the pines. "Let's stop here."

Cherrypaw stopped and turned around. "This is a good place."

Echoheart nodded. "Today, since it's cold and there isn't much prey to hunt, and since we don't want to disturb the limited prey there is, we are going to do battle training."

"Okay!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, crouching down and swishing her tail eagerly.

"I know you picked up some basic fighting moves when you play-fought as a kit, but that will hardly get you anywhere when you come in contact with warriors that are way bigger, stronger, faster, and smarter than you are," Echoheart meowed. She blinked; it felt weird to be teaching another cat. She felt as though *she* should be the one learning, even though she'd been a warrior longer than she had been an apprentice!

"What if," Echoheart continued, "you found yourself face-to-face with Rainstar, who is twice as big as you and nearly four times as powerful? She's had experience with fighting for moons upon moons, longer than you've been alive!"

Cherrypaw looked frightened, and for a moment Echoheart thought she'd gone too far, and she recalled the torture that Cherrypaw had been through while held hostage in DayClan's camp.

But then Cherrypaw's eyes narrowed in determination, and she meowed, "I'd tear her to pieces! I'd do everything she did to all us kits she tortured!"

"It's not as easy as it sounds. By the time you'd even start thinking about what to do, she'd be on top of you, clawing. I've fought DayClan cats," Echoheart sighed. "Here. Pretend like I'm Rainstar. Just don't claw and tear me apart like you'd do to the real Rainstar!"

Cherrypaw smirked. "Okay." She straightened her back legs, rocking her haunches side to side. Then she pounced and ran at Echoheart. Echoheart dodged aside easily, watching her apprentice fly past her. Cherrypaw slipped and fell over, but then got back up again. She leapt, just brushing Echoheart's flank.

Cherrypaw tried again, panting. But Echoheart was ready again. She batted at Cherrypaw, who fell over on her side, looking ready to

give up. Echoheart resisted the urge to laugh. *Had I been like this when I started training?* Echoheart wondered in amusement and surprise. *Was Bronzepelt also resisting the urge to laugh?*

"You had nice techniques," Echoheart meowed. "Leaping at me like that. But you were very predictable. Try and surprise your opponent."

Cherrypaw stood up, shook her pelt, and sighed, "It always worked on Lilacpaw."

"Well that's because you two had the same strengths and were at the same level of fighting. I've had more experience, so of course something that worked on Lilacpaw isn't exactly going to work on me, or any other warrior for that matter. It's best if you find their weaknesses, or what battle technique they're not that good at. Find what advantages you have and what disadvantages your opponent has, and use those against them. For example, DayClan can't fight well in thick bushes since they live on the moor, where there's not as many bushes like there are in DawnClan territory. That's why it's good to know details about each Clan, so when you're fighting them you're always prepared for the different circumstances."

Cherrypaw nodded, eyes bright again. "Okay. Let's try again."

Echoheart nodded. "Try and find any weaknesses I might have. Okay, whenever you're ready."

Cherrypaw circled around Echoheart. Echoheart turned with her. Then, without warning, Cherrypaw pounced, landing on top of Echoheart. Echoheart rolled over, surprised. She heard a grunt as Cherrypaw hit the ground. Echoheart stood back up, looking over Cherrypaw lying on the ground, flanks rising and falling quickly.

"Good job!" Echoheart praised her apprentice. "You pounced on top of me, second try! That was good!"

"Yeah, but I still ended up on the ground," Cherrypaw sighed, standing up again.

"But you successfully landed on top of me and surprised me on your

second try!" Echoheart smiled. When Cherrypaw didn't looked fazed, Echoheart meowed, "Hey, you should be proud that you got me like that on your second try!" Then she added in a whisper, "And just so you know, it took *me* much longer than my second try to land on top of Bronzepelt like that."

Cherrypaw smiled. "I forgot my father was your mentor."

"He was a great mentor." Echoheart meowed, smiling. Then suddenly she hit the ground, the breath knocked from her chest. "Woah!" she gasped.

"Got you!" Cherrypaw exclaimed.

"Nice job. I was not expecting that," Echoheart laughed.

Cherrypaw smiled, eyes sparkling. "Let's try it again!"

"We will. But first I want to teach you an actual battle move."

"Ooh, okay!" Cherrypaw squealed.

"Do exactly what I do." Echoheart sat back on her hind legs, sitting up with her front legs in the air.

"Hey I've done this before!"

"Listen," Echoheart chided.

Cherrypaw quieted.

"Now, some cats stand up on their hind paws only to look big and overpowering, but that has many disadvantages to it. Can you think of any?"

Cherrypaw wobbled. Then she meowed, "Because it's hard to balance!"

"Yes," Echoheart nodded. "That's one reason. Any other ideas?"

"Um," Cherrypaw meowed, wobbling again. "No... no, not really."

"That's okay. I'll tell you. Like you said, it's hard to balance and

leaves you unstable, but it also leaves your belly exposed, and as you know that's a cat's one major weak spot."

Cherrypaw nodded eagerly.

"If you ever use this in battle, only use it if your opponent is smaller than you, but even then it's still not very helpful. It *can* be at times though. If you want to use this move, make sure you're ready for any cat coming at you to knock you off balance. But if you *do* do this, it could intimidate your opponent and you could slam down on them with your claws. It's *very* powerful, since you're using your whole body in that one claw-swipe."

"Okay! But don't use it when your opponent is bigger than you, right?" Cherrypaw nodded.

"Right. Do you know why?"

"Because they're stronger, and they could knock you over easily!"

"Yes," Echoheart nodded. "Now, what if you're facing a huge warrior, and they stand up like this, getting ready to claw you like I just showed you, with their whole body? What would you do?"

"I don't know."

"One good thing you could do, if you're ready and think you're strong enough, is shove into their upward-facing belly. I'd knock them onto their back, and you could get some good clawing in there. Just be ready for them to start kicking back."

Cherrypaw nodded, eyes wide.

"Another thing you could do is to dodge out of the way as they are slamming down. They'd be prepared to hit you, but they'd hit the ground instead and be way off-balance. Once they hit the ground unbalanced, you could jump on them and attack, and you'd have the advantage. Just always be ready for something unexpected."

Cherrypaw nodded again, soaking up every word of what Echoheart was saying.

"Do you want to try it?" Echoheart asked.

"Yes!"

"Okay. Attack me."

Echoheart stood on her hind legs, facing Cherrypaw. She towered over her, ready to paw at her head. Cherrypaw jumped at her, paws shoving into her stomach. Echoheart fell over, and the breath was knocked out of her.

"Did it! First try!" Cherrypaw boasted.

"I let you tackle me," Echoheart meowed, rolling her eyes.

"Oh. Why'd you do that?"

"To let you practice. Now let's try it where I'm ready."

"Okay, but I'll *also* be ready!"

Echoheart stood up on her back paws again. Cherrypaw stood up on her back paws as well. Then she leapt at Echoheart. Echoheart met her mid-strike, toppling her over. They rolled, then suddenly Cherrypaw was gone. Echoheart jumped to her paws and whipped around. Cherrypaw had squeezed out, and she stood on her hind paws again. Echoheart stood, ready. Cherrypaw brought her paws down rapidly, but Echoheart dodged. Cherrypaw's paws hit the ground, and she was unbalanced. Echoheart pushed her over and held her to the ground.

"You let me unbalance you," Echoheart panted. "But other than that you did pretty well."

Cherrypaw stood up shaking her fur. "I guess," she sighed.

"You'll get there. Today's only your first time battle training. The rest of the time we've been hunting. So of course you're not going to master everything I teach you in one day. Remember: practice makes—"

"Perfect," Cherrypaw finished for her. "I know. And I'll keep

practicing!"

"Good." Echoheart nodded. Then she looked up at the sky. The clouds were thicker, and, although she'd just warmed up from fighting with Cherrypaw, the freezing wind still bit at her fur, and she shivered again. "We'd better head back to camp," Echoheart told Cherrypaw. "The storm is really coming in. And it's bound to be close to dusk by now."

Cherrypaw nodded, shivering as well.

Echoheart led the way through the forest. The trees creaked in the howling wind above them.

By the time Echoheart and Cherrypaw returned to the camp again, it was even colder, and the snow had started falling in big white clumps. They looked like hundreds of white tufts of fur falling from the sky.

"Look," Echoheart heard Meadowheart saying to her kits. "It's snow."

Her four kits were sitting up in the nursery entrance, pressed against each other, staring wide-eyed at the snow tumbling in front of them. Cricketkit stood up and crouched on his back legs, batting the snow with an outstretched paw. Pansykit sneezed when a snowflake landed on her nose, and Acornkit and Pollenkit giggled.

"They're so cute," Cherrypaw laughed.

"You were like that too!" Echoheart purred. "I watched you play all the time."

Cherrypaw smiled.

"Cherrypaw! Cherrypaw! Guess what?" Lilacpaw was bounding across the camp.

Cherrypaw bounced toward her sister. "What?" she asked eagerly.

"Sunfur taught me some battle moves!" the dark tortoiseshell and white she-cat squealed.

"Echoheart taught me one too!" purred Cherrypaw.

"You two can show each other your new battle moves," Echoheart suggested. "That way you'll practice your own *and* learn a new one."

"Good idea!" Cherrypaw meowed excitedly. "How about right now?"

"I can't," Lilacpaw sighed. "Sunfur told me to get the elders fresh-kill and then get inside the den. It's too cold to stay out."

"That's dumb," Cherrypaw whispered.

"Hey, Cherrypaw," Echoheart scolded. "Don't call anything a warrior says 'dumb', especially not about the deputy. She's older and way more experienced than you are!"

Cherrypaw looked guilty, and sad that she'd let her mentor down. "Sorry."

"You can help Lilacpaw do her apprentice duties tonight," Echoheart continued sternly. "And I'll show you how to do more of them tomorrow."

"Yes, Echoheart," Cherrypaw murmured quietly, them followed her sister across the camp to the fresh-kill pile. They each grabbed a small piece of prey, then pushed their way through the wind and snow and into the elders' den.

Echoheart blinked, shivering, then padded across the camp to get herself some prey. The fresh kill pile was actually a pretty good size considering it was leaf-bare. It definitely wasn't anything like new-leaf, but it was somewhat full. Echoheart grabbed a small nightingale, then pushed her way toward the warriors' den.

The den was crowded. Echoheart blinked in surprise, then pushed past the other warriors, avoiding eye contact with her parents, and found Clovertail, Rayclaw, and Hailstorm.

"Have any of you eaten yet?"

"Yeah," Hailstorm yawned, blue eyes heavy. He looked like he was about to fall asleep on his paws.

"What did you *do* today?" Echoheart asked him, laughing.

"Went hunting."

Echoheart watched as he leaned against Clovertail, slowly sinking toward the ground. Echoheart turned to Clovertail and Rayclaw. "Did you two eat?" She thought that maybe she should share it with another warrior, especially since it was leaf-bare.

"Yeah, we did," Rayclaw nodded. "We shared a mouse. It wasn't very big," he shrugged. "But it fed us."

"Oh, alright. I guess this is all for me then."

"Don't be selfish, Echoheart," a voice muttered from behind her.

It was Sparktail.

Echoheart's heart froze. "I... I'm not. I asked them if they ate and they said yes, so—"

"*So*, there are other cats who haven't eaten yet," her mother snapped.

"Fine then, I'll go ask some other cat!" Echoheart growled.

"Well, *I* haven't eaten yet, you know," Sparktail retorted.

"Sounds like your own problem," Echoheart shot back bitterly. "I wasn't going to ask you anyway. Who wants to share a meal with a cat who treats her own daughters like crow-food?"

Sparktail recoiled in shock, looking hurt. "I don't treat you like crow-food," she growled.

"Then what do you call how you've been treating Whispersong? How you just treated me?" Echoheart growled, claws flexing. "I will stand up for what is right, not what you fox-hearts *think* is right!"

"I wouldn't do it if Whispersong wasn't—"

"Why don't you open your heart up and accept Whispersong as she

is? You don't know how hurt she's been because of how you and Rustypelt are treating her! Her kits are *your* kin! How will you treat them when they're born?"

Sparktail looked confused. "She's mates with a *DayClan* cat!"

"Stormpaw was a DayClan cat and she's the reason you were able drive Rainstar out! What has Bumblefrost done to make you not trust him? What did he do to you to make you now hate Whispersong?" Sparktail didn't answer. "Nothing!" Echoheart shouted. "He's done nothing but protect and love Whispersong, nothing but stand by us, and save my life *twice*, nothing but hunt for this Clan— and it's not even his own— to try and prove his trust! Just think about that! Maybe he deserves to be treated fairly in return!"

Echoheart whipped around and stomped away, completely forgetting about the prey she had left on the ground by Sparktail's paws. She curled up on her nest without another word to any other cat. She hardly even realized that the den had gone quiet during hers and Sparktail's argument.

Good, Echoheart thought bitterly. *They all heard it, and now maybe they'll think about changing how they treat Whispersong and Bumblefrost!*

Echoheart scowled to herself, listening to the den slowly get louder with talk again, then she drifted into an uncomfortable sleep.

* * *

The half moon was setting to Echoheart's left and the sun was nearing sunhigh to her right as she headed back into camp with Cherrypaw, Lilacpaw, and Sunfur. They'd all gone battle training together, and Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw had quite improved.

It'd been nearly a half-moon since Echoheart had taken Cherrypaw on that first battle training. The snow from that day still clung to the forest; the weather had not improved since then in the slightest. It was still bitterly cold and windy, and fog constantly hung over the forest, except for today. Today was the first clear day in what

felt like forever. It was still cold and the ground was still covered in snow, but the sky was blue above them.

"Good job, you two," Sunfur purred, long brown and black-flecked tail high in in pride. "Now, go finish up your apprentice duties, then you're free to do whatever you want the rest of the day, just so long as it's in the camp."

Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw nodded excitedly. "We should show Meadowheart's kits a battle move! They're old enough to play, right?"

Sunfur nodded. "Yes, I saw them play-fighting yesterday. Just ask Meadowheart before you start attacking her kits."

"And do your apprentice duties *first*," Echoheart added. "I told Spruceclaw, Copperleaf, and Twilightfoot you'd get them new bedding and fresh-kill by sunhigh. And it's getting close to sunhigh."

"We'll get it done!" Cherrypaw promised.

Sunfur eyed them sternly. "*First.*"

"First!" Lilacpaw echoed. Then the two apprentices ran ahead through the bramble barrier and into the camp.

"I hope they'll listen," Sunfur muttered.

"Lilacpaw will, but Cherrypaw... it seems like anything someone says goes in one ear and out the other," Echoheart sighed.

"True," Sunfur chuckled, shaking her head.

The two warriors entered the camp together, then split up by the fresh-kill log. Sunfur joined Eaglefeather, Sagetail, Eveningstar, and Gravelpelt by the base of the High-stone, while Echoheart sat down beside Star and Rosepaw.

"*You're* good at fighting though!" Star was meowing.

"And you're really good at hunting," Rosepaw pointed out.

"That's because I only hunted prey in the Tribe. I was a prey-hunter, not a cave-guard."

"Yeah, well you caught that huge hawk today! And you'll get better at the battle moves; I'll practice with you tonight," Rosepaw promised.

"You caught a hawk today?" Echoheart asked the small silver tabby she-cat, impressed.

"Yeah," Star purred, looking embarrassed.

"Nice job; we'll need that. It'll feed quite a few cats, especially in leaf-bare."

Star nodded, beaming.

"So how was your training with Eveningstar?" Echoheart asked.

Star shrugged. "Well, I hunted that hawk, then we did battle training, and Rosepaw, Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather, and Needlepaw joined us, but I wasn't that good—"

"Yes you were!" Rosepaw insisted. "You may not have beaten any of us, but that's because we've been training longer than you have at fighting!"

"Yeah, you'll get there," Echoheart assured her.

"Maybe I'm just not meant to fit in," Star sighed.

"Then what did your dreams mean?" Echoheart asked. "The dreams you had over and over again about the Clans before Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and I even arrived at the Tribe?"

"I know they meant for me to come back with you, I know, I know. But for *what*? How does my destiny lie *here*, when I've never been here or heard of here in my whole life?" Star sighed again. "I don't know, but I'm glad I've come. Your ways are a bit confusing, and your warrior code is a *lot* to remember, but I do like it here. I'm still sad about home, and I think about my Tribemates every night, but I think I can be happy here. I hope I can, at least"

Echoheart nodded and smiled. "We're glad you came with us."

Rosepaw nodded in agreement, then looked around. "Well, I'm going to find Needlepaw and Pinepaw. I'll see you later."

"Bye," Star murmured.

Rosepaw turned and trotted across the camp, soon disappearing beyond the High-stone.

"I'm going to go visit Whispersong," Echoheart meowed. "Do you want to come?"

"No, it's alright. You visit your sister, I'll find some prey and take a nap," Star yawned.

"Alright. I'll see you later then."

Star turned and padded away, and Echoheart headed toward the nursery. She paused by the entrance and heard Meadowheart talking to her kits. Echoheart blinked, then stepped inside.

One of the kits squealed as he saw Echoheart. Echoheart halted as Pollenkit bolted away to hide behind his mother.

"Scaredy-mouse!" Acornkit teased, sitting next to his other littermates, who were curled up on the ground grooming each other and tugging at each other's ears tiredly.

"Sorry," Echoheart meowed to Meadowheart. "I didn't see him there." She could just make out the black shape of Pollenkit huddling behind Meadowheart's tortoiseshell and white fur, his bright green eyes wide.

"You're fine," Meadowheart laughed. "Pollenkit, this is Echoheart. She's another warrior."

"Really?" Pollenkit mewled.

"Yes. You'll be a warrior someday too."

"And I bet *I'll* be the bestest, most strongest warrior ever!" Acornkit

boasted from the back of the den.

"No!" Pollenkit piped up. "*I* will!"

"Warriors don't hide!" Acornkit teased, blue eyes alight with mischief. Pollenkit jumped from behind Meadowheart and pushed over his brother. The two mewled and squirmed, rolling over and over each other.

"Did you need anything, Echoheart?" Meadowheart asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm looking for Whispersong."

"Oh. I... I think she's in the medicine cats den."

"But aren't Goldheart and Yellowflower at the Moonfall? Last night was the half-moon."

"They just got back, before you and Sunfur returned from trai—" She was cut off as Pollenkit let out a howl. "What's wrong?" Meadowheart exclaimed, turning around in worry.

"He clawed me!" Pollenkit cried, glaring at Acornkit.

"Acornkit!" Meadowheart growled. She turned back to Echoheart. "If you'll excuse me..." Echoheart nodded and left the den as Meadowheart scolded Acornkit.

Echoheart blinked away the brightness as the sunlight reflected off the snow, then she trotted to the medicine cats den. She pushed her way through the vines draping the entrance then stepped onto the cold stone floor.

Whispersong was sitting hunched over, and Goldheart and Yellowflower were talking to her, but Echoheart noticed Yellowflower looked very distant. They paused and looked up as they saw Echoheart, and Whispersong turned around.

"I was just looking for Whispersong," Echoheart meowed. She blinked at her sister. "So you finally left the nursery."

"I needed some fresh air." Whispersong shrugged. "Goldheart and

Yellowflower have just told me that I should be expecting one or two kits," she purred.

Echoheart smiled, then turned to the medicine cats. "Do they seem healthy? As far as you can tell?" she asked.

Goldheart nodded. "Well, Whispersong is healthy, so I think the kits are too. It's hard to tell without actually seeing them yet, but if their mother is healthy, the best guess is that the kits are healthy too."

Whispersong sighed. "Good."

"They should be born soon too," Goldheart added, "within a quarter moon, I believe."

Whispersong widened her eyes. "That soon?"

Goldheart nodded. "It's gone by fast, hasn't it?"

"It has," Whispersong sighed. "I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"You'll be fine; your motherly instincts will kick in, and you'll know what to do," Goldheart assured her, flicking his tail. "Now, I've got to go and talk to Eveningstar," Goldheart meowed, eyes darkening. "Yellowflower, you'd better come too."

Yellowflower jerked from her thoughts, eyes focusing again, then followed her mentor out of the den with a hasty goodbye to Whispersong and Echoheart.

"What do you think they want to talk to Eveningstar about?" Echoheart asked worriedly as soon as the medicine cats left.

"I don't know. But Yellowflower seemed troubled about it."

"It has to be about something that happened at the Moonfall," Echoheart reasoned. "Because they just got back, and Yellowflower was fine yesterday before they left."

"Do you think one of them had another darkness dream? Like Goldheart has been having, and like Star had?" Whispersong asked quietly.

"I don't know," Echoheart sighed.

There was a silence.

Whispersong sighed. "We should leave their den," she meowed, getting to her feet.

Echoheart nodded distractedly, her mind still on Yellowflower's distant expression. She followed Whispersong out of the den, across the snow-blanketed clearing, and under the shade of a tall pine. Whispersong crouched down, looking deep in thought. Echoheart sighed, then sat beside her sister, listening to the camp bustling around her.

Cherrypaw had finished her apprentice duties with Lilacpaw, and the two were now trotting across the camp and entering the nursery. They emerged from the den again a little later, with Meadowheart and her kits following.

"We'll teach you some simple battle moves!" Cherrypaw boasted, her long, red fur puffed out in pride. Echoheart snorted in amusement. She watched as the two apprentices tried showing the four young kits one of the first battle moves Echoheart had taught Cherrypaw, but it wasn't very successful. The four kits kept falling over and getting distracted, playing with each leaf or piece of bark on the ground, much to Cherrypaw's annoyance.

Echoheart laughed to herself. *Now you know how* I *feel trying to teach you something!* she thought.

Suddenly a loud, worry-filled voice rung out in the air, and every cat in the clearing paused. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!"

Echoheart shared a glance with Whispersong. Was this about what Goldheart had left to tell Eveningstar about? About what Yellowflower had looked so worried about?

Echoheart got up and walked over toward the High-stone beside her sister, finding a spot in the very back where they wouldn't be so near to the cats who disliked them.

Meadowheart's kits tried to join the gathered group of cats, but Eaglefeather, passing by, stopped them. "No, you need to go back to the nursery with your mother. You're not old enough to catch your own prey yet."

"But we *could* be!" Cricketkit protested.

"Yeah, Father, we wanna hear too!" Pansykit mewled in complaint.

"No." Eaglefeather shook his head sternly.

"We'll still be able to hear Eveningstar in the nursery anyway!" Acornkit mewled angrily over his shoulder as he and his three littermates stomped away.

Eaglefeather shook his head. "Kits."

"They won't be able to hear from the nursery will they?" Meadowheart asked her mate in an undertone.

Eaglefeather blinked. "No, why?"

"Because I have a feeling this Clan meeting has to do with Freezepaw's death, or something awful like it. Just look at Eveningstar's, Goldheart's, and Yellowflower's expressions," Meadowheart meowed in worry. Echoheart followed Meadowheart's gaze. The three cats atop the High-stone had eyes stark with worry and fur bristled in fear. Echoheart shuddered. "And I don't want the kits to hear about something like that," Meadowheart added in sadness.

"They won't hear Eveningstar from the nursery; it's too far away. And I'll tell you everything that happens afterward, since you won't hear it either," Eaglefeather promised.

"Okay, thanks," Meadowheart sighed. Then she turned and jogged back to the nursery, her tortoiseshell and white fur soon disappearing inside the den after her kits.

Echoheart watched Eaglefeather sit beside Creekfall, Aspenleaf, Gravelpelt, and Sunfur. Sparrowtail and Moonshine sat on the opposite side as them, with Needlepaw, Rosepaw, Pinepaw,

Cherrypaw, and Lilacpaw behind them. Sparktail and Rustypelt distanced themselves from the rest of the group to the far right, while Bronzepelt, Sagetail, Rayclaw, Hailstorm, Star, and Clovertail sat to the far left. Twilightfoot, Copperleaf, and Spruceclaw sat at the front, looking up at the three cats towering over them. Bumblefrost, again, was not here. Echoheart turned to her sister and told her.

"He's not?" Whispersong asked, looking around the clearing. "Where's he been lately?"

"Is it because you're having kits? He might be nervous—"

Whispersong sighed. "No, it's not about our kits. He's thrilled to be a father."

"But then why is he gone from camp so often? That's not going to earn him trust at all."

"I think he's angry with the way DawnClan is treating the both of us. I think he wants to get away from it." Whispersong sighed again. "But I hardly ever see him anymore! Ever since we got back from the mountains, things have started falling apart! This wasn't supposed to happen, Echoheart! I had wanted to go home so badly while we were with the Tribe, but now I kind of wish we hadn't come home. What has *happened*?"

"I feel that too," Echoheart murmured with a sigh. "It doesn't feel much like home anymore, like it used to. But it'll all work out in the end. Things will turn out alright again," she promised her sister, praying her words were true. "You'll see."

"I hope so," Whispersong murmured, looking pained. "I just—"

But she was cut off by Eveningstar starting the Clan meeting. Echoheart jerked her head up to look at Eveningstar, Goldheart, and Yellowflower. "As you know, last night was the half-moon, and Goldheart and Yellowflower have come back with news from the other medicine cats, but I'm afraid it isn't good," Eveningstar yowled. Echoheart blinked in worry, and every other cat in the clearing shared fearful glances. "Mushroomcloud of DuskClan has

disappeared, and Robintail of NightClan was found dead."

Every cat gasped. Immediately the clearing was filled with growling and wailing, worry and anger. Echoheart's stomach dropped, clenching in horror. Another cat dead? And one cat now missing? Fear and confusion swept across the clearing like an icy wind, and Echoheart shuddered.

Goldheart stepped forward as if in a trance. "Robintail was found a quarter-moon ago: hardly recognizable and covered in blood like DuskClan described Freezepaw," Goldheart announced in a voice filled with disgust. Yellowflower sat next to him, eyes closed in pain. "They found a scent on it, though they couldn't recognize it; like with Freezepaw, the blood was too strong to really recognize much else."

Echoheart's stomach was sinking lower by the heartbeat. Her throat was clenched, and she could feel whatever was in her stomach threatening to make an appearance. But she willed herself not to vomit, and it looked like other cats were doing so as well.

Goldheart spoke up again, voice unsteady. "Mushroomcloud disappeared almost a half-moon ago, just a night or two after the Gathering. No cat has found any trace of her, whatsoever." He paused, looking away for a moment. "No sight, no scent, no sound. Nothing. Just gone."

Echoheart glanced beside her. Whispersong was breathing raggedly, staring at her paws. Aspenleaf and Creekfall looked horrified, and the five young apprentices looked terrified out of their fur.

Some warriors were cursing at the sky, calling out at whoever was causing this, while others were stiff with fear, leaning against each other and murmuring with wide eyes.

Echoheart didn't know what to do or think. The same type of death. Twice. And now a disappearance. Did the same thing kill Robintail and Freezepaw, and cause Mushroomcloud to disappear? It seemed like it was. It was all around the same time, and in all three cases they had no trace of what had done it to them. Echoheart shuddered. First DuskClan, then NightClan. Just across the

Thunderpath and into the forest was DawnClan. Would some cat in DawnClan disappear or suffer the same death that Robintail and Freezepaw had?

Echoheart's stomach tightened in terror. *StarClan, tell us what it is! We need guidance!*

"Icedapple and Crystalheart said that their Clans still think it's Rainstar doing this, as she was scented by the Thunderpath not too long ago," Goldheart meowed. Yellowflower nodded in disgust.

"Well of course it's Rainstar!" Bronzepelt spat. "Who else would do that! Rainstar has shown us many times over what she will do for power!"

"And now she's probably even more desperate," Creekfall snarled. "Now that she's outcasted from DayClan, she'll want revenge on all the Clans for driving her out."

"Yeah!" Spruceclaw growled. "The only way to truly stop her is to kill her!"

"But we don't know where she is," Eveningstar meowed loudly, shaking his head.

"Near NightClan or DuskClan territory; that's where these attacks were, and it's where she was last scented!" Rayclaw reminded them loudly.

"But that's a lot of land she could be in, and if no cat from NightClan or DuskClan has found her yet, how will *we*?" Aspenleaf growled.

"She has a point," Eaglefeather nodded.

"Then the best we can do is keep an even closer watch in our borders," Sunfur yowled, turning to look up at Eveningstar. "We need to send out more patrols."

Eveningstar nodded. "I guess it's the most we can do. But from now on, no cat is to leave this camp without being accompanied by two other warriors. Kits will be forbidden to leave the camp at any cost,

even to drink. We'll have water patrols to get soaked moss for the queens and kits. Apprentices, we don't need to halt training altogether, but you need to train in groups of four: two mentors and two apprentices. No mentor and apprentice will go out alone."

The five apprentices nodded quickly, eyes round and full of terror. It didn't look like Cherrypaw or Lilacpaw even wanted to go training anymore. Their fear of Rainstar had been strongly reinstated.

"But would a *cat* be capable of killing another cat like that or causing them to disappear without a trace? No one has found *anything* around the site of these cats' deaths," Star spoke up above all the murmuring. "So we don't even know if it is Rainstar."

"Who else would it be?" Moonshine snapped.

Rustypelt let out an angry growl. "Who else *could* it be?"

Star blinked, murmuring something to herself that Echoheart couldn't hear.

As much as Echoheart hated to side with her father over Star, she had to agree with him and all the other cats; Star hadn't lived here long enough to understand Rainstar's character. And based on these descriptions, it sounded an awful lot like Rainstar's doing. Echoheart's stomach convulsed in anger. They'd find Rainstar, and they'd kill her. She deserved to die after all that she had done to countless, helpless, innocent cats. *She'll be* destroyed*, and any cat helping her would be sorry they were ever born.*

Chapter 11

Whispersong blinked open her eyes, stretching beside Bumblefrost. Last night Eveningstar had agreed, grudgingly, to let Bumblefrost sleep in the nursery with her; the apprentices' den was becoming quite full with six apprentices. Meadowheart hadn't liked it when Whispersong told her, but she eventually convinced the tortoiseshell queen that Bumblefrost meant no harm to her or her kits and would only ever be in the den at night.

Yesterday, after the Clan meeting about the mysterious deaths and disappearances, Whispersong had found Bumblefrost coming back into the camp by himself, carrying prey. He was now allowed on hunting patrols again, seeing as he hunted anyways when he was by himself, but he still wasn't allowed to go on border patrols, though it didn't seem like he cared; he hadn't been on a patrol since Eveningstar had told him he could.

When he had reached her, she had asked him again, trying to hide her annoyance, why he was leaving her so often. He had told her, as he had last time, that he had gone hunting for himself and brought back prey with them. Whispersong had asked why he didn't just join a patrol since he was allowed to, but he'd just said he didn't want to hunt with DawnClan cats, especially not hunt *for* them. He had said that when DawnClan finally saw what kind of warrior he was and showed trust in him, then maybe he'd hunt for them again. But until that moment, he'd hunt for himself and Whispersong only.

Whispersong sighed and yawned, looking around the nursery. Meadowheart and her kits were not in their nests; it was just Whispersong and Bumblefrost in the den.

Bumblefrost stirred beside her, yawning. "What time is it?" he murmured drowsily.

"Probably just before sunhigh," she replied quietly, glancing at the light at the den entrance.

"Okay," Bumblefrost yawned again, blinking away sleep from his green eyes.

Whispersong stood up, arching her back in a stretch. Her jaws gaped in a yawn. "Let's go see what's happening around camp," Whispersong murmured. "Plus, I want to find Echoheart."

"Why, is something wrong?" Bumblefrost asked in worry, getting to his paws quickly.

"No," Whispersong assured him. "I've just been stuck in camp all this time and I want to see if I can join her when she goes out to train Cherrypaw. Eveningstar said that cats can't leave the camp unless accompanied by two more warriors, and you could come too."

"You're confined to camp, Whispersong. And besides, Echoheart could just join up with two other mentors and their apprentices. She wouldn't need us to be there," Bumblefrost muttered.

"We can still ask her."

"You'd have to get Eveningstar's permission first," Bumblefrost warned.

"I know, I know."

"Wait, but shouldn't you be resting? You told me yesterday that Goldheart said our kits will be born very soon!"

"But I need to stretch my legs. They feel all stiff; taking a walk in the forest will help," Whispersong argued, shaking her front paw.

Bumblefrost shrugged. "Fine, you can ask Eveningstar and Echoheart, but don't get your hopes up."

Whispersong lead the way outside the den and across the camp. When she finally spotted her sister by the sunning-stones, she trotted over to her, a bit wobbly.

"What are you doing outside the nursery?" Echoheart asked. "Aren't your kits due soon?"

"Yes, but I want to stretch my legs," Whispersong meowed. "So maybe I could go out training with you and Cherrypaw?"

Echoheart blinked. "You're confined to camp," she warned.

"I know that. I'd ask Eveningstar."

"And how do you know walking around the forest is good for your kits?"

"I'll ask the medicine cats, too, then." Whispersong flicked her tail in annoyance. "And don't you need to have two warriors accompany you anyway?"

Echoheart blinked. "Yes, but I was planning on going with Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather, and their apprentices."

Whispersong blinked. "Oh."

"But they went on the dawn patrol!" Cherrypaw piped up.

"Oh yeah. They went on the NightClan border dawn patrol," Echoheart murmured to herself.

"The NightClan border what?" Bumblefrost asked.

"If you were at the meeting yesterday you would know," Cherrypaw meowed with an air of superiority. Bumblefrost blinked, trying to contain his anger.

"Cherrypaw, cut it out," Echoheart snapped. "And don't be rude to a warrior; they deserve respect."

"But he's a *DayClan* warrior!"

Whispersong stepped forward. "He *was* a DayClan warrior; he's not anymore. He'd never do anything to help Rainstar again."

Bumblefrost shifted his paws.

"Yeah right," Cherrypaw muttered.

"Bumblefrost wasn't even here when Rainstar kidnapped you and

Lilacpaw," Echoheart meowed quietly. "He wants to get rid of Rainstar as much as we do. He'd never help her, I promise."

"Okay," Cherrypaw sighed, still eyeing Bumblefrost warily.

"Anyway," Echoheart meowed, turning to Bumblefrost. "We have two dawn patrols and two evening patrols now. A NightClan dawn and evening patrol, which checks the NightClan border and the border by the Twolegplace, and a DayClan dawn and evening patrol, which checks the DayClan border and the border that we don't share with any Clan."

"Oh," Bumblefrost murmured, looking lost in his own thoughts.

"Well," Echoheart sighed. "Cherrypaw and I have to go training. I think I'd be best if you two stayed here, because you'd be breaking your punishment, Whispersong. You know Eveningstar would make you stay at camp."

"Alright, alright," Whispersong grunted with a lash of her tail. "Just another day sitting in the camp doing nothing."

"I'll see you later," Echoheart meowed, padding across the camp with Cherrypaw following. They found Sunfur and Lilacpaw, then Eveningstar and Star. And soon the six of them were leaving the camp together to go training. Whispersong sighed, then dragged herself back across the camp and into the nursery. She flopped down on her nest and listened to the cats bustling around the camp without her.

* * *

The last sun rays disappeared from the darkening sky, and the stars twinkled into view by the heartbeat. Whispersong sat beside Bumblefrost outside the nursery, sharing a small sparrow. Cats were slowly dispersing and settling into their dens for the night. Eveningstar took the first guard, and Echoheart, Cherrypaw, Sunfur, Lilacpaw, and Star said their good nights and headed to their dens after returning late from their training session. Whispersong watched her sister praising Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw, and jealousy squirmed in her stomach. Whispersong should have been the one

training Lilacpaw, not Sunfur. Whispersong could be sitting there, telling Lilacpaw what a good job she had done today, planning out the next day of training, spending the day out in the forest with her sister and both of their apprentices, together, as they had always planned.

Whispersong shook her head. *No; I'm having kits! I couldn't train an apprentice with kits!*

She was scared about having kits, especially since they would be half-Clan. But she wouldn't change it for the world. She couldn't wait to be a mother, couldn't wait to watch her very own kits grow, open their eyes, take their first steps, play with each other, become apprentices, train, mature, become warriors one day, and serve their Clan. Whispersong felt her heart warm at the thought, and she realized with a smile that having kits was maybe better than training an apprentice.

Bumblefrost nudged her back into her senses, and together the two headed toward the nursery and curled up beside each other on their nests to go to sleep.

Whispersong lied awake for a while, listening to Meadowheart's kits tossing and turning, and finally falling asleep. Bumblefrost was completely still next to her, flanks rising and falling peacefully. She sighed and laid her head on his side, feeling her sleepiness overtake her.

Whispersong blinked open her eyes. Something had woken her, some strange urge. She looked around the den. Every cat was asleep. She stared at the den entrance. It was pitch black out. What had woken her?

Whispersong blinked, then stood up and stretched. She quietly padded to the den entrance, looking out at the camp. Eveningstar was no longer on guard; Moonshine had taken his place, which meant that it had passed moonhigh. Whispersong looked up, searching for the moon amongst the thousands of stars shimmering above her. She found it hovering above the treetops behind the High-stone, sinking toward the horizon. Dawn would soon approach.

Whispersong sighed again, then lowered her gaze.

She nearly screamed. Her heart thumped louder than the monsters on the Thunderpath, and her eyes were as wide as full moons. Her fur bristled along her spine and fear sunk deep into her stomach.

A pair of eyes stared at her from behind the medicine cats den. But they weren't cat eyes. Whispersong gulped as the eyes reflected the moonlight eerily. She trembled, fear overtaking her body. She glanced quickly at Moonshine to see if she had seen it too, but the older warrior didn't seem to notice anything amiss.

Whispersong turned her gaze back to the medicine cats den, but the eyes were gone.

* * *

Whispersong had sat in the very same spot the rest of the night, but the eyes had never returned. Dawn crept upon the forest, turning the sky a pale, rosy pink. The birds began to chirp in the bare branches above, and a chilly breeze blew across the short brown grass. But Whispersong wasn't paying attention to that. She was still hard on the lookout for those two eyes. What are they? A badger's? A fox's?

Then it struck her, and she jolted in shock. Were those the same eyes Echoheart had seen all those moons ago when they were still apprentices? The eyes Echoheart had realized were a sign, sent by the Tribe of Endless Hunting?

Whispersong gasped. She had to tell Echoheart! She stood and padded across the camp cautiously to look for her sister. She was on edge, jerking her head at every little noise. Her heart pounded, and in her distraction she nearly ran straight into Clovertail and Rayclaw.

"Woah!" Whispersong yelped.

Rayclaw rolled his eyes, laughing. "Honestly, you would have thought that by now you'd learned to watch where you were going," he meowed sarcastically.

Whispersong sniffed in annoyance, not in the mood for Rayclaw's jokes. "I was distracted, okay?"

"Obviously," Rayclaw snorted in amusement.

Whispersong rolled her eyes in annoyance, muttered, "Whatever," then stepped around Rayclaw and Clovertail and walked away, ignoring Clovertail's hasty apology as she passed.

She found Echoheart sitting beside Hailstorm and Sparrowtail, talking about last night's evening patrol.

"...couldn't find it anywhere. Not on the DayClan border or the NightClan border or anywhere else!" Hailstorm growled.

"Couldn't find what?" Whispersong asked.

The three warriors turned. "Rainstar's scent," Echoheart muttered.

"Oh." Whispersong should have known. She sighed; she knew Hailstorm was one of the best trackers in DawnClan, so if he couldn't find any traces of Rainstar anywhere, then no one in DawnClan would.

"So Rainstar's nowhere to be found," Hailstorm muttered angrily.

"Well that could be good, couldn't it?" Sparrowtail blinked. "If we can't find her scent, then she might be gone—"

"But she could be lurking anywhere," Hailstorm replied angrily. "Before, at least we had an idea of where she was and where she had been! Now we know nothing! What if she wants to kill another cat—"

"—which seems like something she'd do—" Echoheart muttered.

"—How would we know which Clan territory to find her in? She could very well be in DawnClan territory next!" Hailstorm finished, looking furious and extremely worried.

Whispersong blinked. He had a point. Rainstar could be hiding anywhere. She could be deep into DuskClan territory or she could

just outside the DawnClan camp! "Well, then we should keep everyone inside the camp until we're sure she's not waiting outside to attack us. Did you tell Eveningstar?"

"He was on the patrol with us," Hailstorm muttered. "He knows."

"Well, what did he say about it?" Echoheart asked worriedly.

Hailstorm turned to her, blue eyes dull. "Not much, except that we can't all stay inside camp, even though that'd be a safe option, like you said. But it'd be impossible. We need to hunt and secure our borders. If we hid in camp, we'd starve before Rainstar would even have the chance to kill again," Hailstorm sighed. "But Eveningstar's still keeping in place the rule that no cat can leave camp unless accompanied by two other warriors."

"Well, that's good at least," Whispersong sighed.

"I can't believe we're being haunted by one fox-dunged cat!" Sparrowtail snarled.

"Three, actually. Flamethorn and Emberclaw joined her," Echoheart muttered.

"Oh, I forgot about them," Sparrowtail growled. "Those fox-hearts."

They all nodded, and there was a silence.

"The camp seems empty," Whispersong commented, looking around her. "How many patrols are out right now?" she asked.

"Just the two dawn patrols, but that is four cats on each," Hailstorm meowed, pausing. "Then Yellowflower and Goldheart went to see if any herbs by the stream are salvageable. Apparently the herb they're looking for is best when dried out, so now is the time to look for it," Hailstorm shrugged.

"Didn't they need another cat to accompany them? Eveningstar doesn't—"

"Yeah, I think they left with Moonshine," Hailstorm replied.

Whispersong nodded, staring at the bushes beyond the medicine cats den, suddenly recalling last night. That's where she'd seen the eyes. She sighed. She still needed to tell Echoheart about it.

"Where's Cherrypaw?" Hailstorm asked Echoheart, breaking the silence.

"Sleeping. The other mentors and I decided it was best to leave them sleep after yesterday's long training session," Echoheart meowed.

"Well since Cherrypaw is sleeping, do you want to join my hunting patrol? Sunfur told me to take one out at sunhigh, and it's sunhigh now," Hailstorm offered.

"Sure," Echoheart smiled.

Whispersong smirked, then remembered: "Echoheart, before you go, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"What's wrong?" Echoheart immediately asked.

"Nothing," Whispersong meowed, trying to sound convincing. Hailstorm and Sparrowtail were looking at her in worry. "Nothing's wrong. I just need to tell you something."

"Okay," Echoheart meowed slowly, still looking concerned. She followed Whispersong across the camp then sat down. "What's wrong?" she asked. "And don't tell me nothing; I know something's bothering you."

Whispersong took a deep breath. "I saw a pair of eyes in the bushes last night. Like—"

"Like the ones I saw?" Echoheart gasped.

"I don't know what it means, but it nearly scared me out of my fur. Do you think it was a sign like the last one?"

"What else could it be?" Echoheart sat in thought, blue eyes distant. Then she turned back to Whispersong. "When *I* saw the eyes, it was like a warning for something, I think... I don't really remember

what it was a warning of though. It was four seasons ago..."

"Well, we got that dream to go to the mountains after you saw it."

"So... so maybe something to do with the prophecy happens every time we see it... Maybe it *is* a warning. Of what, though?"

"The danger arriving in the forest," Echoheart suggested in a whisper.

Whispersong froze. "It can't be here *yet*... can it?" Whispersong murmured in fear.

"I don't know; I really hope not, but we can't be sure."

"But we would've seen things— footprints and stuff like that— wouldn't we? Or heard of something from the other Clans! Or even scented it! How..." Whispersong's head was spinning in terror. The danger couldn't be arriving yet! *We're not ready!* I'm *not ready!*

"I would have thought there would be traces of it," Echoheart whispered. "Maybe there are, and we just haven't realized it."

"Of course we'd realize it! Or some other cat would, at least! If there's a great big bear walking around the Clans of course some cat will see it!"

"Not necessarily. We know there's a bunch of foxes around in these forests, but we never see them. Same with badgers. They can hide."

"I guess, but then what about scent?"

"No cat has reported any unusual scents, I don't think," Echoheart murmured.

Whispersong sighed. "Well then what could this sign be warning us about?"

"I don't know," Echoheart sighed, looking worried. "I guess we'll find out."

Chapter 12

The weather had significantly warmed overnight. Instead of the icy breeze of yesterday, a warm wind now blew across the camp, and any remaining patches of snow were gone. It felt like new-leaf already. As everyone had noticed and pointed out, this leaf-bare had been way less harsh than the last leaf-bare. Because there wasn't as much cold and snow, prey was more abundant than any cat could have thought, and there had been no word of whitecough at all, which relieved every cat greatly. Whispersong vividly recalled last leaf-bare's whitecough with a shiver. Whispersong shook the thought away. All the cats who had lost their lives to the sickness were safe in StarClan.

Thinking of StarClan reminded Whispersong of the eyes sign she had seen two nights ago; she had told Echoheart yesterday, and so far nothing amiss was reported. Echoheart had volunteered to go on one of the dawn patrols to make sure no one was overlooking anything that might have to do with the danger. She had promised that when she got back to camp, she'd tell Whispersong if she had found anything unusual.

Whispersong now sat beside Bumblefrost and Star and was recounting to them how she had seen the eyes last night, and how she and Echoheart had thought that the Tribe of Endless Hunting hadn't sent it to them this time, but that StarClan probably had.

Star And Bumblefrost looked shocked and concerned, as Whispersong had told them that Echoheart thought that maybe it was a warning that the danger was finally coming to the forest, and that the prophecy was about to unfold.

Whispersong turned as Yellowflower ran up to them, looking worried. "Have you seen Goldheart lately?"

"No, why?" Whispersong asked, fur tingling in fear.

"I haven't seen him since we came back from collecting herbs yesterday!"

"*Yesterday*?" Bumblefrost echoed in confusion.

"Didn't he come back with you?" Star asked.

"No, he told me he was going to take a little longer to dig up the rest of the herbs, so he told Moonshine and me that we could head back early and carry the herbs we'd already collected, and he said that he'd be right behind us. I went to bed right when I got back because I was so tired, and when I woke... I expected Goldheart to be there in the den too, but he wasn't!"

"Was his scent fresh on his nest?" Whispersong asked, fear escalating.

"No! It was stale!" Yellowflower was near hyperventilation.

"Tell Eveningstar and ask him to send out a patrol," Whispersong suggested, fighting to sound calm to prevent Yellowflower from having a panic attack.

"Eveningstar is on the dawn patrol!"

"Sunfur?" asked Echoheart.

"On the other dawn patrol!" Yellowflower wailed. "No more cats can leave the camp, not with so many gone!"

"I'm sure a few more can, if this is an emergency," Whispersong murmured, heart pounding uncontrollably.

Yellowflower's eyes were alight with terror. "Will you come with me?"

Just as Whispersong was about to answer, a group of cats burst into the camp, eyes filled with rage and horror. Sunfur was at the front of the returning patrol, and Bronzepelt, Eaglefeather, and Pinepaw were behind her. All four cats had huge eyes, lashing tails, and heaving flanks. Terror was flaming in their eyes.

"Goldheart is dead!"

Silence. Dead silence. A silence so deafening it hurt Whispersong's ears, filled with ringing. Shock rippled across the camp, and gasps echoed off the trees around them. Whispersong gulped in a breath of air, heart racing faster than her mind. Her mind became fuzzy. Her vision blurred, and she swayed on her paws.

No, it can't be... There must be some mistake...

Then the silence was shattered. "NO!" Yellowflower shrieked, crumpling to the ground, trembling. "No..." she whimpered.

Then the clearing erupted into shouting:

"Goldheart *can't* be dead!"

"Was it Rainstar AGAIN?"

"RAINSTAR DESERVES TO DIE!"

"Why, StarClan? WHY?"

"STARCLAN HAS ABANDONED US!"

"WE'RE BEING PICKED OFF ONE BY ONE! WE'RE DOOMED!"

Whispersong was on the ground, trying to push herself up. But she collapsed. Star was rigid in fear and anger beside her, trying to help Whispersong to her feet.

"We..." Sunfur choked, still panting. "We first found his scent by the stream, then..." her voice faltered, "then there was a trail of dried blood across the forest, and it ended at the Thunderpath. And that's... that's where... where we found him."

"Goldheart! No!" Yellowflower screamed, then she got to her paws and sprinted across the camp and out into the forest.

Sunfur turned tail and ran after her. "Yellowflower! Come back!"

"Yellowflower!" Moonshine tore after them, yowling at her daughter

to return.

"I'LL KILL RAINSTAR! I'LL KILL HER!" Yellowflower screamed, voice quickly fading.

Hailstorm and Clovertail shared a miserable glance as their mother ran after their sister, then they bowed their heads in silence.

Whispersong sniffled, head swimming with blurred colors. *No... not... not Goldheart...* She turned toward Bumblefrost and began to try and say something, but she realized that she was talking to no one. She whipped around.

Bumblefrost was gone.

Whispersong looked around wildly but couldn't find him. Had he left the camp *again*? Worry crept up her spine. If Rainstar had killed Goldheart, Bumblefrost could still be in danger, and he wouldn't know it. Rainstar could still be in DawnClan territory. She could be lurking in the bushes, waiting for her next victim.

Whispersong let out a painful, uneven breath, collapsing to the ground. Goldheart couldn't be dead. Just *couldn't*. He was injured, that's all, and Yellowflower would heal him.

Whispersong shook with sobs, vision darkening, blackening, and every cat around her had their heads bowed, eyes shut tight in the agony.

* * *

Whispersong awoke in the nursery, Echoheart beside her. She bolted upright. Was it just a bad dream? It *had* to have been!

"Goldheart's not...?" Whispersong murmured, turning to her sister.

Echoheart let out a pained breath and shut her eyes. "He's dead."

Whispersong's heart plummeted into her stomach. *No...* She flattened her ears.

"They brought his body back just after you passed out. Hailstorm,

Rayclaw, and Bumblefrost helped carry you in here a little bit ago; you've been unconscious for awhile."

"Bumblefrost is back?"

Echoheart nodded. "He got back a little bit ago. He's out paying his... paying his respects to Goldheart right now."

"*He* is?"

"Yeah," Echoheart muttered, still looking distant. "Every other cat already d-did pay their respects... he was last, besides Yellowflower, who refuses to leave his side, even though... even though..."

"Even though what?" Whispersong breathed, stomach sinking.

"It was awful, Whispersong! Eveningstar, Sunfur, Rustypelt, and Bronzepelt carried him back... and... and Yellowflower was screaming and clawing... I've n-never seen her so... so vicious." Echoheart paused, voice faltering. "Goldheart... was... was... just as Orangestar had described Freezepaw..."

Whispersong's stomach convulsed in disgust and horror.

"His fur was all gone... except his face and a few patches here and there... but... all bloody... raw skin... only one ear... no tail... legs floppy... bones sticking out and broken ev-everywhere..."

Whispersong swallowed down her disgust.

"He was hardly recognizable... any cat outside DawnClan would never had known that it was... that it was Goldheart," Echoheart choked.

Whispersong gulped, a large lump of fear in her throat. She could barely swallow. She looked around the empty nursery. "Where are... where are Meadowheart and her... her kits? They don't...know, do they?"

"No, the kits don't know about... about this. Meadowheart shoved them into the nearest den when she saw the warriors with... with Goldheart. They're in the elders' den... I think."

Good. They don't need to see something like... something like that, Echoheart thought, stomach clenched.

"Eveningstar, Sunfur, Rustypelt, Bronzepelt, and Sparktail went out on a search party to try and find any scents around... where they found Goldheart," Echoheart murmured. "Nearly the whole Clan thinks it's Rainstar."

"Who wouldn't?" Whispersong snarled.

Echoheart nodded solemnly in agreement.

"How is she doing this?" Whispersong growled. "She's been scented around all the Clan territories, and cats are being brutally murdered... yet no cat ever finds her! Where in the name of StarClan is she?"

Echoheart's blue eyes darkened. "It's *Rainstar*. She's gotten past loads of obstacles and still followed through with all her plans before. She'll do it again; she *has* been doing it again. But... But this time we need to catch her..." She flattened her ears and closed her eyes in grief. "We *have* to."

* * *

Whispersong bowed her head and squeezed her eyes shut as Eveningstar honored Goldheart at the Clan meeting. Tears streamed down her already-wet fur. The sleet drizzled down from above in sheets, dampening DawnClan's already sorrowful moods. It was as if StarClan was crying for the loss of DawnClan's medicine cat.

But why would StarClan cry over a cat they *took? They left us,* Echoheart thought bitterly. *All this awful death... and they're not stopping it...*

Eveningstar's voice echoed across the camp, full of grief and agony. He yowled, louder than the howling wind and pounding sleet. "We lost Goldheart today. Our faithful, unwavering, kind, empathetic, caring medicine cat. Our friend, our Clanmate. A member of our family. But Goldheart did not die in vain," the DawnClan leader hollered above the storm, ears flattened, gray fur dripping. "His

spirit will always be with us; watching us, guiding us. He will find his place in StarClan. His pain, his suffering, will be gone.

"I know what you're thinking, that StarClan must have abandoned the forest with all these brutal, unexplained murders, but know this: no matter what you feel, StarClan has *not* abandoned us! They are as pure as fresh fallen snow; as clear as the stream, as warm as the ever-rising sun. Their loyalty will last for eternity! It is more powerful than the darkness engulfing this forest! When all seems lost, look up at the stars that shine over us. StarClan will be with us through day and night; through green-leaf and leaf-bare; through life and death; through hope and loss. As long as the sun rises over these trees, as long as the stars shine above, StarClan will be with us!

"We may have lost Goldheart to this darkness, but he now walks among the countless spirits before him. He may seem dead to us, but he still lives on, in the shimmering stars above, and, more importantly, in our hearts. In these times of darkness, look toward those stars! He, alongside StarClan, will be with us. Always."

* * *

Whispersong sighed. Her head was laid on her paws as she stared at Pollenkit and Cricketkit playing half-heartedly outside the den in the freshly-fallen snow. Meadowheart's kits knew Goldheart was dead, though no cat had told them, nor had they seen his body. Those kits knew something was amiss; they knew Goldheart hadn't been seen for days. They knew.

Whispersong sighed again, leaning against Bumblefrost, who was asleep restlessly beside her. No one ever slept soundly these days. Goldheart's death had been four days ago now, and Yellowflower was now the only medicine cat; she hadn't left the den since, not even for food or water. Moonshine, Clovertail, and Hailstorm took turns bringing her her share of fresh-kill, and sometimes one of them would come out of her den with the prey still in their mouth.

Whispersong sighed. This was similar to Ferrettail's behavior after Fogtail had died. And Yellowflower herself had said, all those moons ago: "I can't *make* Ferrettail eat; I can't give him herbs to

help his condition either. No herb can ever heal a broken heart..."

Whispersong sighed again. And Ferrettail's broken heart seemed to have been the reason he'd died. *Hopefully that won't happen again, to Yellowflower. Hopefully she will come to her senses soon...*

Leaf-bare still clung to the forest, but it hadn't snowed since Goldheart's death. It'd been mostly cold and cloudy, but prey was abundant for leaf-bare standards. And no cat from any of the Clans had been reported to be sick. Not one. *And it's a good thing no cat has gotten sick in DawnClan.* If someone *had* caught a sickness, Whispersong wasn't sure if Yellowflower would be able to help. She was very unstable, and didn't seem to be a part of DawnClan anymore with the way she was secluding herself from the rest of the Clan.

Whispersong sighed deeply.

Eveningstar had been distant at first, like the rest of DawnClan, but now, as time had gone on, he realized he still had to lead the Clan, and he tried not to show his grief for the dead medicine cat.

Bronzepelt and Rustypelt, Whispersong had noticed, hardly ever spoke anymore, and were very depressed lately, though not as bad as Yellowflower. Goldheart had been their brother.

Whispersong sighed once again, stomach squirming.

She suddenly remembered, just about a quarter-moon ago, when Goldheart had told her that her kits would be due in about a quarter-moon from the day. It was now nearly a past that time. Her kits were late, later than the medicine cat had told her. Why had Goldheart been wrong? Had he been distracted? He *had* seemed distant that day, along with Yellowflower, now that Whispersong thought about it. They had mentioned something about darkness... and dreams...

Whispersong blinked and jolted up. She quickly left toward the entrance to the den, looked over her shoulder at Bumblefrost sleeping, then jogged through the thin layer of snow and to the medicine cat den.

"Yellowflower?" Whispersong called.

Whispersong heard a grunt from inside, and Whispersong stepped inside the den. Yellowflower was lying on her side, back facing Whispersong.

"Yellowflower? Can I talk to you?"

Yellowflower slowly sat up, weakly holding herself up on her paws. "What?" she asked quietly, voice ragged with sadness.

"Please, just hear me out. This may help us figure out Goldheart's death."

"I do not want to talk about that," she murmured.

"Please, Yellowflower."

There was a long pause. "Fine. What do you want to tell me?" she asked half-heartedly.

"Remember that day you and Goldheart were telling me about when my kits will be born?"

"What does this have to do with anything?" Yellowflower snapped.

Whispersong blinked. "On that day, Goldheart had seemed distant; it was the day you returned from the Moonfall a little over a half-moon ago."

Yellowflower blinked, staring past Whispersong. She seemed to be remembering something.

"He'd mentioned dreams of darkness. And even before that Goldheart had been muttering about 'darkness' in his dreams." Whispersong murmured. "And another time, Star had a dream of darkness and went to talk to Goldheart, and she realized that they had had very similar dreams."

Yellowflower whispered, "Goldheart told me that he kept having the same dream, at the Moonfall and at camp. And I had one of these dreams at the Moonfall last half-moon too."

Whispersong took a deep breath. "Do you think," she asked, "that these dreams, that you, Goldheart, and Star had... do you think that... that they were about Goldheart's death? And these other deaths that seem to all be connected?"

Yellowflower blinked. "Would StarClan send a cat a dream of their own death?" she asked, voice faltering.

"I... I don't know. But these dreams, they're all connected, like these murders are, and I have a feeling you'll be having more of these dreams soon."

"You think there's going to be more death?" Yellowflower murmured in fear, finally meeting Whispersong's eyes.

"Until we find Rainstar and put an end to her tyranny, permanently, I think there's going to be more cats dying."

Yellowflower sighed. "Then no cat, under any circumstances, should leave the camp alone, like Eveningstar said. I made the mistake of letting Goldheart stay out of camp by himself... And now he's... gone... because of it."

"We just have to be on our best guard, at all times, and pray to StarClan Rainstar can be stopped as soon as possible," Whispersong shuddered.

* * *

Whispersong awoke from her sleep with a jerk. She blinked. It was pitch black outside, and the nursery was quiet; Meadowheart and her kits were curled up in their nests, and Bumblefrost snored beside Whispersong.

Whispersong blinked again. What had woken her?

A jolt of pain suddenly shot up from her stomach, and she gasped.

What's happening? she thought in worry, her breathing quickening. She cried out as another jolt of pain lanced through her, and she clawed at the ground. Her belly felt like it was on fire; everything was burning with pain, and scorching, hot claws were tearing at her

skin.

She screamed.

Bumblefrost jerked awake, leaping to his paws. "Whispersong!" he exclaimed in horror.

Whispersong whimpered as the pain subsided for a moment, then clenched her teeth and growled as more agony clawed up her body. She couldn't see. Her brain was fuzzed and she blinked in and out of consciousness.

Pain. More pain. Misery... endless pain.

She screamed as the pain threatened to tear her apart.

Meadowheart was beside her, her kits huddling at the back of the den in terror. Whispersong could barely make out their bodies as Bumblefrost ran in circles around her, panicking. Meadowheart growled an order at him, and he sprinted from the den.

Whispersong's ears weren't working. There was commotion all around her, but nothing made sense... There was just pain. Only pain.

She shrieked. She was going to die! The fire was eating away at her, engulfing her in a world of agony beyond anything she'd ever experienced. She screamed again, crying out at someone, anyone, to help her. The fire scorched her stomach relentlessly. She yowled once more, thrashing in desperation.

She let out a few ragged breaths, eyes rolling into the back of her head.

And suddenly like a wave of relief, blackness surrounded her and she felt no more.

* * *

"Fox-dung, Whispersong! Wake up, wake up! Now, Whispersong!" growled a worried voice in Whispersong's head.

As soon as Whispersong opened her eyes again, the pain took hold of her again. She cried out in fear.

"Good, Whispersong! Stay awake! Whatever you do, do not close your eyes! Do you hear me, Whispersong? DON'T CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

"WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?" Whispersong yowled in terror. The fire in her stomach was clawing and tearing at her insides again. She fought to keep her eyes open, as the voice had told her, but all she could see were swarms of color; she didn't know if her eyes were opened or closed.

She screeched again. More pain. Endless pain. Clawing her from the inside out. Would it ever end?

"Eat these, Whispersong! Now! Come on!"

Whispersong saw green dots in front of her nose. She shuddered in pain, then collapsed in a world of blackness.

She choked awake. There was something in her mouth! She started to gag, but some cat growled at her. "Swallow the fox-dunged herbs!"

Whispersong listened, wanting to do anything to make the pain stop. The fire was still eating away at her...

Then, gradually, it lessened. The blurred swarms of color focused into cats, huddled around her, and the pain was now bearable. She breathed heavily.

And then the agony engulfed her again. She gasped and cried out, stomach ablaze with pain, but not as bad as before.

"Kits... now..." Whispersong could make out the voice of Yellowflower, but didn't register much of what she had just said. Her brain didn't seem to be working.

Whispersong breathed faster, whimpering, gasping.

And then suddenly the pain was gone.

Yellowflower shoved forward with something small and silver in her jaws. Whispersong was still gasping for air. Her sides heaved. But the pain had ceased. Bumblefrost was beside her, licking her head, murmuring that he thought she was going to die. Echoheart appeared too, rubbing her head on Whispersong's side and murmuring something quietly that Whispersong couldn't understand.

And then a third cat meowed something soothingly at her, and Whispersong turned her head and stared right up at Sparktail. Her mother licked her head numerous times; she was crying, murmuring how sorry she was; Whispersong barely understood most of it, but she knew from her mother's voice that she was not angry with Whispersong any longer, and the thought made Whispersong smile as she fell unconscious again.

When she woke again, it was light out. Everything was fuzzy, and her senses were blurred. A warm tongue rasped over her head. She turned and saw a blur of tan and black tabby fur. Her eyes slowly focused, and the shining green eyes of Bumblefrost were staring lovingly at her. Whispersong blinked a few times, adjusting her eyes to the den around her.

A small squeak rung in Whispersong's ears and she jerked her head down. Memories flooded back in waves... the pain, the herbs, the pain, Sparktail and Echoheart, a ball of fur...

Whispersong stared at her belly. Nestled in her fur lay a tiny silver bundle of fuzz, quivering with tiny breathing. Whispersong's heart warmed as she stared at her kit. *Her* kit. Hers. As the words sunk in, Whispersong smiled, every part of her warm with exhilaration. She couldn't remember being this happy in forever; she was almost happier than when she'd received her warrior name.

She turned to Bumblefrost. "There was only one, right?" She didn't want to believe that there *had* been more than one...

"Yes. Just her."

"A she-kit!" Whispersong purred, smiling even brighter.

"Yes, and she's perfect." Bumblefrost nodded with a smile.

Whispersong blinked in warmth as she stared at her daughter, then she licked her fuzzy body. The tiny she-kit quivered, then let out what sounded like a purr.

Whispersong smiled again, then turned back to Bumblefrost. "Did Rustypelt ever come and visit? I know Sparktail did."

"No, but I saw him looking worried when Sparktail left the den. He looked like he wanted to come in, but Sparktail wouldn't let him. I... I think your parents have finally forgiven us," meowed Bumblefrost happily.

Whispersong's smile widened even more, and she purred.

"What is her name going to be?" Bumblefrost asked.

Whispersong blinked. That was a hard question. It had to be a name both she *and* Bumblefrost liked, and a name that their daughter would like too: a name she would grow up with, carry with her for the rest of her life. The thoughts made Whispersong feel overwhelmed. She turned to Bumblefrost and told him this.

Bumblefrost laughed. "Yes, true, but there's no need to feel stressed about it. Besides, she won't know any different from the name we give her."

"I guess so," Whispersong blinked. "Do *you* have any ideas?"

"Not really."

Whispersong blinked, staring at her kit in thought.

Then suddenly it came to her. She tried it out in her head. It fit. It suited their kit perfectly. She looked at Bumblefrost and murmured, "Jasminekit."

He turned to her. His pale green eyes met her brown, and he smiled.

Memories flooded back to Whispersong, and Whispersong could see

in Bumblefrost's eyes that the memories were coming back to him too:

Bumblepaw purred in amusement, bowing his head in playful respect. "Yes, oh great Whisperstar, leader of CaveClan!"

Whisperpaw stepped up onto a ledge only three mouse-lengths off the ground and sat proudly on it. "This will be the High-step!" She sat taller as if she really was Whisperstar. "Bumblepaw, do you promise to protect and defend CaveClan, even at the cost of your next meal?" She purred in amusement.

"I do!" Bumblepaw meowed, laughing.

"Then I give you your warrior name! You will be my new faithful deputy: Bumbletail!"

"How about Bumbleclaw?" Bumblepaw whispered. "Just pretend you named me that."

"Okay," Whisperpaw laughed. "My faithful deputy! Bumbleclaw!" then she stepped forward and meowed in a deep voice, "Bumbleclaw, you must find me a, uh... jasmine leaf... to prove that you are a worthy deputy." She laughed at Bumblepaw's confused look.

He shrugged and meowed in the same deep voice, "Anything for you, Whisperstar! I promise that you won't regret your choice," he bowed. He then turned around and left the den, leaving Whisperpaw alone. She watched him go, her tail curling up in happiness.

When Bumblepaw trotted back in the den, his pale green eyes glowed with pride. He carried a jasmine leaf carefully in his mouth.

"We'll done, Bumblepaw, I mean, Bumbleclaw. You have proved yourself to be a worthy deputy of CaveClan."

Bumblepaw smiled, meowing in his playfully deep voice, "It's nothing I wouldn't try my hardest to do, Whisperstar."

Whisperpaw stared at the jasmine leaf he'd brought her, heart warming.

It was then, in that cave, when Bumblefrost had brought her that

jasmine leaf, that Whispersong had known that she cared about Bumblefrost, that she had true feelings for him, that she wanted to spend more time with him, and become more than friends.

Whispersong shook the memory from her mind and stared warmly at Bumblefrost."Jasminekit. It's perfect," Bumblefrost purred, leaning against Whispersong, and the little silver ball of fuzz stirred as if in agreement.

Chapter 13

Echoheart watched Jasminekit opening her eyes. It had been a quiet half-moon since Whispersong's and Bumblefrost's daughter had been born. And in that half-moon, every cat in DawnClan seemed to have finally accepted Bumblefrost and Whispersong. The birth of a new DawnClan kit, and seeing what a great father Bumblefrost was, had finally proven to DawnClan that Bumblefrost could belong in this Clan. Yes, some cats were still wary and skeptical of having a former DayClan warrior and his half-Clan kit in DawnClan, but no cat let that show. Jasminekit would be DawnClan through and through; she'd never second guess her loyalty to her Clan Jasminekit let out a squeak of happiness as she saw her mother's face. Whispersong purred. "Mother's here." Jasminekit half-giggled, half-squealed.

Echoheart smiled. Jasminekit looked exactly like Whispersong: silver tabby fur with thin stripes and a long, thin tail. But she did have the subtle, muscled build of her father; long, strong legs meant for chasing prey over the grasslands.

Meadowheart's kits, now just over two and a half moons old, were watching Jasminekit in wonder.

"Over here, Jasminekit!" Pansykit squealed, trying to get the small kit to look at her.

Jasminekit giggled again, letting out a small squeal, then rolled onto her back clumsily. She looked upside down at Meadowheart's kits, batting at them.

"Hey!" Acornkit mewled in surprise.

Cricketkit and Pollenkit laughed.

Whispersong was smiling wider than Echoheart had seen in awhile, which made Echoheart smile.

Jasminekit tried to stand up again, but wobbled and fell, then proceeded to crawl awkwardly toward Whispersong. Whispersong licked her daughter affectionately on her tiny head.

Just then Bumblefrost stepped inside the den, a small vole in his jaws. Jasminekit let out an excited squeal as she saw her father, and Bumblefrost's pale green eyes lit up. He dropped the vole then touched noses with Whispersong and licked Jasminekit's small head.

Bumblefrost meowed, "I caught this for you on the hunting patrol."

"How was it?" Whispersong asked.

Bumblefrost shrugged. "Getting better. Rustypelt still won't talk to me, but he's not being mean or glaring at me, so that's an improvement. And all the apprentices are warmed up to me, even Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw. The older warriors are still a little wary of me, but Eveningstar, I think, has finally accepted me."

Whispersong nodded and smiled.

"But they still won't let me near the DayClan border; not that I want to anyway. Eveningstar says it's just to keep DayClan from becoming provoked if they see me. I mean, I understand his reasoning; you can't trust some of the DayClan cats' judgement, not since Rainstar brainwashed them. Although, I suppose it's better now that Nettlestar is leader..." he sighed and shrugged. "But it doesn't even matter. I don't even want to go near DayClan. They'd punish me for betraying them, just like R—" he cut off, shook his head and looked away, then mumbled, "Nevermind."

"I'm sure it will all calm down eventually," Echoheart meowed. "Every cat will accept you are now a DawnClan cat, and when you go to Gatherings—"

"I don't want to go to any Gatherings," Bumblefrost meowed quietly, still looking away at the den entrance, a distant look in his eyes.

"You don't have to," Whispersong murmured.

"*I* want to go to Gatherings!" Pollenkit squealed from behind

Meadowheart, bouncing up and down beside his siblings, who nodded vigorously in agreement.

"You will," Meadowheart assured them. "In time." The tortoiseshell queen glanced at Whispersong, then meowed, "Come on, let's go outside."

Jasminekit was fast asleep, pressed up against Whispersong. Whispersong's eyes were closing. She must not have gotten much sleep last night.

"But it's cold outside!" Pansykit protested.

"Whispersong and Jasminekit need to sleep," Meadowheart replied. "Come on." Then she and her kits exited the den quietly and headed out to the clearing.

Echoheart smiled as Whispersong fell asleep beside her daughter.

"I'm going to stay here with them," Bumblefrost meowed quietly, still looking distant.

"I'll see you later then," Echoheart replied, blinking. Then she turned and headed toward the den entrance, and, with one backward glance at Bumblefrost lying beside Whispersong, Echoheart stepped out of the den.

The cold evening air slapped Echoheart across the face. She winced as the wind came a heartbeat later and scratched her with its icy claws, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Shivering, she quickly made her way across the camp to a group of warriors huddled under a low-hanging pine tree branch by the High-stone. Eveningstar meowed over the rising wind, "I think that a storm *is* coming in, and I don't want an evening patrol out with this risk."

"We've carried out patrols through storms, heat, and cold," Creekfall argued. "We can't just let one possible storm stop us from securing our borders!"

"But a storm isn't the only danger!" Eveningstar replied angrily. "Something is killing cats, Creekfall—"

"I know that!" Creekfall retorted. "But—"

"Well, I do not want to risk anything happening to any more of my cats! I don't want to risk your lives for one patrol! It just isn't necessary! Just because there is a large group doesn't mean you won't be in danger," the DawnClan leader added as Gravelpelt opened his mouth to protest. "And if you come across the thing killing these cats, you will be at a disadvantage with this storm, even if there are four or five of you against one! I *will not* risk any one of my cats' safety!" Eveningstar growled with finality.

"So no evening patrol? Shouldn't we make sure the borders are secure, that it's safe for us and for our kits?" Eaglefeather growled in anger.

"We can have three cats posted at the entrance of the camp tonight then," Eveningstar meowed. "And they can be switched out halfway through the night. Agreed?" Every one of the warriors around him nodded. "We can take out a border patrol first thing in the morning, if the weather improves. Listen. I just want what's best for the Clan, what's best for each and every one of you. I don't want to put you at unnecessary risk, understand?" Everyone nodded. "Sunfur, Eaglefeather, Aspenleaf? Can you take the first shift?" They nodded. "Good, then at moonhigh... well I guess we won't be able to tell when it's moonhigh with all this fog... whenever you're getting tired, switch out with the second shift. Hailstorm, Bronzepelt, and Moonshine, can you be the second shift?" The three warriors nodded. "Then we're all set. Now, get some rest. We're going to need the help of nearly every cat tomorrow."

The warriors dispersed, and Echoheart found Hailstorm then walked beside him as they headed to the warriors' den.

"How's Whispersong?" Hailstorm asked.

"Tired, and happy for the first time in what seems like *forever*," Echoheart smiled.

"And Bumblefrost?"

"Better."

Hailstorm nodded thoughtfully, looking ahead and squinting against the wind. "He's been different since their kit was born. I like this Bumblefrost better. He's more like Whispersong describes him as, and less like... he used to be."

Echoheart nodded.

"He'll fit in more with time. And everyone will trust him." Hailstorm turned to Echoheart. "It will work out, like you said."

Echoheart half-smiled, then sighed. "But everything hasn't worked out yet."

"What do you mean?" Hailstorm asked as they reached the den entrance.

Echoheart stopped, and Hailstorm halted beside her. She turned to him, looking into his eyes sadly. "Cats are dying all around us. We don't know who will be next. It could be us for all we know."

"Don't say that."

"Its true. We don't know. And on top of all this, the prophecy is going to unfold! The danger may destroy us! The bear will be coming, and the Clans will be *destroyed* if we can't unite them like the prophecy told Whispersong and I. That'll be nearly impossible. And what happens if it arrives *tomorrow*? Whispersong has to care for Jasminekit! She won't be able to devote all of her time into protecting the Clans! What happens if we *fail*, Hailstorm? Every cat will die because of *us*."

"You don't need to worry about this at the moment," Hailstorm cut her off sternly. "There's no need to stress yourself out about this yet —"

"What do you know?" Echoheart retorted angrily, all of her stress exploding inside her. "What do you know about having the weight of all the Clans' survival put on *your* shoulders? Since I was a kit I've had to deal with the fear, the *terror*, of having my Clanmates die around me, *because* of me! I've had to live with the constant agony of knowing that one day I'd have to fulfill a *prophecy*, fight a

monsterous, murderous creature alongside my Clanmates, lead them into a danger that could surely kill them!"

Hailstorm looked taken aback at Echoheart's sudden outburst. Echoheart didn't even notice; she raised her voice over the wind, narrowing her eyes at Hailstorm angrily. "And not only are all the Clans in this forest relying on me, but *StarClan* is relying on me! Our *warrior ancestors*! They chose me for this, and what if I let them down? If I let them down, their former Clans that they risked everything to protect, *died* to protect, will be gone! Do you know how much weight is on mine and Whispersong's shoulders? And now every cat expects me to act *normal*! I can't even sleep at night because of the stress that haunts me nearly every moment of my life!"

She was crying now, crumpling to the cold, hard ground, shaking, shivering. She felt alone, more alone than she'd ever felt before, isolated in this world of darkening shadows. There was no sign of light, no way out, only darkness, and she had to lead her Clanmates right into it.

* * *

Echoheart blinked open her eyes. Hailstorm lay beside her in her nest, eyes heavy with sleepiness and concern.

The memories rushed back to her... the yowling, the anger, the immeasurable stress. Then guilt filled her chest. "I'm sorry," she murmured to Hailstorm, voice cracking from all the yelling she'd done last night.

Hailstorm smiled sadly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm... I'm good now... I guess."

"I'm sorry you've had to deal with this. You've had to keep this secret, had to leave your Clan to the mountains for it, had to hold all the stress inside you for the sake of your Clanmates... everyone has underestimated you."

Echoheart's vision was blurred by tears. "I don't know how to deal

with this..." she choked out.

Hailstorm looked pained to see her in pain. "Echoheart, you've got cats all around you won't hesitate to follow you, to fight beside you. We'll fight beside you to protect this Clan, and the other Clans. You can always trust us. We all love you. *I* love you."

Echoheart sniffled. "I love you too, Hailstorm," she whispered, leaning against him, staring up at the stone den around her. Then Echoheart sat up. They were in a *stone* den. "Are we in the medicine cats den?" she asked in confusion.

Hailstorm nodded. "Yellowflower insisted you sleep in here to get your mind off things without having to have other cats all around you. She wanted you to get a peaceful rest. And I said I'd come with you."

Echoheart nodded. "Where is Yellowflower?"

"Sleeping in the other part of the den, by the herbs I think."

Echoheart looked around. It was still pitch black outside. She blinked. "I thought it was morning."

"No," Hailstorm shook his head. "It's still the middle of the night. You were mumbling in your sleep, so I woke you up."

"Oh." She paused, then asked, "Weren't you supposed to take the second guard shift?"

"Yeah," Hailstorm meowed, "But I didn't want to leave you, so they found another cat to take my place," he purred, turning to lick her nose gently.

It warmed Echoheart's heart to know that she had someone who would stick by her no matter what. Even though she had yelled at Hailstorm last night, he still stayed by her side. "Thanks for staying with me," Echoheart meowed, leaning against him with happiness.

Hailstorm purred. "Always."

When the first light of dawn finally illuminated the camp,

Echoheart still lay wide awake, listening to the steady breathing of Hailstorm fast asleep beside her.

Yellowflower walked around the corner, stretching. "You alright?"

"I'm good," Echoheart nodded, yawning. "Thanks for letting me sleep in your den, Yellowflower."

The medicine cat smiled. "The dawn patrol will probably be leaving soon. You should join it, to get your mind off things."

"Alright," Echoheart meowed. She turned to Hailstorm and woke him. He groggily opened his eyes, and Echoheart told him they were going to join the dawn patrol.

"Okay," he yawned, then he got up and arched his back in a long stretch.

Echoheart, Hailstorm, and Yellowflower exited the den together into the frosted camp. The weather was still chilly, but the fog had gone and the sun was shining down upon the forest. Echoheart soaked up the sun's rays.

The three headed toward the fresh-kill pile, where nearly the whole Clan was.

Once they finished their small meals, Echoheart found Sunfur. "Hailstorm and I want to join the dawn patrol," she told the deputy.

Sunfur nodded. "Creekfall is leading it. He's over by the apprentices' den with Aspenleaf."

Echoheart nodded, then she and Hailstorm padded across the camp to Creekfall and Aspenleaf, who were talking with their three kits. Creekfall turned as he saw Echoheart and Hailstorm.

"We want to join the dawn patrol," Echoheart meowed.

Creekfall nodded. "Alright."

"Ooh, can I come? Please!" Needlepaw pleaded. "I'll ask Rustypelt first!"

"Oh, alright. Only if he says it's okay," Creekfall meowed, watching his son sprint toward his mentor.

"You should bring Cherrypaw, Echoheart," Aspenleaf meowed. "She hasn't been on many border patrols."

Echoheart nodded, then padded across the camp to look for her apprentice. Echoheart approached Sagetail. "Have you seen Cherrypaw?" she asked the cream she-cat.

Sagetail nodded. "She's with Bronzepelt and Rayclaw by the fresh-kill pile."

Echoheart trotted to the fresh-kill pile. "Cherrypaw, we're going on the dawn patrol."

Cherrypaw's green eyes lit up with excitement. "Okay!" she purred. "I'll see you later then," she meowed to her father and older brother. Cherrypaw followed Echoheart back toward Aspenleaf, Creekfall, Hailstorm, and Needlepaw.

But before she reached them, Bumblefrost came jogging over to her. "Whispersong needs to talk to you."

"Is something wrong?" Echoheart asked sharply, with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"I don't know; she didn't tell me what she's going to tell you. But she didn't look *too* worried I don't think."

Too worried? She didn't look too *worried? What is that supposed to mean?* Echoheart thought in concern. She turned to Cherrypaw. "Tell Creekfall and Aspenleaf that I'll be there in a few heartbeats." Cherrypaw nodded and padded over to the two warriors.

Echoheart followed Bumblefrost to the nursery, where Whispersong sat, Jasminekit asleep peacefully beneath her.

"What's wrong, Whispersong?" Echoheart asked her sister.

"Nothing yet. But," she sighed, "I have to tell you: I saw the eyes again last night."

Echoheart froze. "Again?"

Bumblefrost growled. "You saw those StarClan-ridden eyes *again*?"

"Yes, and it's *not* good," Whispersong shivered. "Do you remember the last time I saw these eyes, nearly a moon ago? We discussed something."

Echoheart nodded slowly.

"You said that maybe everytime we see the eyes, something to do with the prophecy happens."

Echoheart nodded again, mind reeling.

"Well, I think it's true. I... I realized this this morning, but," she took a deep breath, "the last time I saw the eyes... It was at night. And the next day, Goldheart was found dead."

Echoheart took in a sharp breath. Her heart skipped a beat. "Are you saying...?"

"Yes, I think that someone is... is murdered every time we see those eyes. And if the eyes are a sign having to do with the prophecy, then these death that happen after we see the eyes must have to do with the prophecy too."

Echoheart's heart was pounding. "So..."

"Yes, all these cats dying, disappearing... I don't think it's Rainstar's doing after all." She paused, shuddering. "I think... the danger has finally arrived upon the forest, and it's what is killing all these cats."

"But... But..." Echoheart couldn't think straight. "You mean... You mean that a *bear* has been lurking in these forests, and killing these cats? But... But we're not ready yet! We... Oh no, Whispersong! We have to unite the Clans... We have to... we..."

Star burst into the den. "I'm sorry, but I overheard you talking and... *The bear is here*?" she exclaimed in terror.

"It's in the area we think." Whispersong shuddered.

"Star," Echoheart turned to the silver she-cat. "You know about bears. When do you think it'll attack?" Her voice was filled with desperation.

Star blinked in thought. "Well, bears hibernate, or sleep, most of leaf-bare; so this bear must only be killing off cats that come near it. Bears are territorial too; it's probably trying to mark its territory if it's killing cats and not eating them. It won't *fully* attack until it's stronger, which will be in new-leaf." Star sighed. "By the way, I had another darkness dream a few nights ago. I spoke to Yellowflower. She had one too. These shadows are growing darker, and the time is drawing nearer. More cats are going to die before this is over." She paused, then sighed. "None of us can breathe a word of this to any other cat. I'll tell Eveningstar later when he takes me out training; he's the leader, and he deserves to know. And if any one of us has another dream, or sees another sign, can we agree to meet up and tell each other?"

Echoheart and Whispersong nodded.

"Remember, I'll stick with you," Star vowed, "until the end."

* * *

Echoheart followed Creekfall, Aspenleaf, Hailstorm, Needlepaw, and Cherrypaw out of the camp and through the forest, glowing pale yellow in the sunrise. She had acted as normal as she could when she had rejoined them. She tried to push the conversation from her mind, but without success. The bear really was lurking about. It *wasn't* Rainstar for once. But what she really couldn't get from her mind was that some cat was going to die very soon.

She jumped at the crack of a twig and whipped her head around.

"Sorry," Needlepaw meowed quietly, then he and Cherrypaw hurried after Creekfall and Aspenleaf.

Hailstorm fell back to walk with her. "Why are you all of a sudden on edge? Does it have to do with something Whispersong told you?"

Echoheart stared ahead determinedly, trying to steady her

breathing. She didn't answer, then thought, *He deserves to know. He has stuck by me all this time... And he's continued to stick by me.* He did deserve to know. Echoheart turned to him and looked into his deep blue eyes. "Whispersong doesn't think Rainstar is the one killing all these cats," she whispered.

"What?" Hailstorm exclaimed loudly.

"Shh!" she hissed, looking at the four cats ahead of them, who didn't seem to hear Hailstorm.

"Why?" he asked in frustration. "Of course it's Rainstar! Who else—"

"It's not a 'who', Hailstorm. We don't think it's even a cat."

"What else in the name of StarClan would it be then?"

"Do you remember us telling the Clan about the prophecy when we returned from the mountains, and what we discovered about it while there?" Echoheart asked quietly.

Hailstorm nodded. "You and Whispersong have to save the four Clans from a creature... What was it?"

"A bear." Echoheart shuddered at the word. "Ten times as big as a badger, ten times as strong, with claws and teeth bigger than anything we've ever encountered. The Clans have never seen one before, but Whispersong and I did, and Star has seen them numerous times. They aren't a danger up in the mountains—"

"Then why will they be a danger here?" Hailstorm asked, voice filled with fear.

"Because in the mountains, there is nearly unlimited amount of territory for the bears to roam, hunt, and live. Here, the bear that is moving in has Thunderpaths, Twolegplaces, and *four* Clans of cats to deal with. It wants territory for itself, and it'll get angry with everything preventing it from doing so." She sighed. "Star said that come new-leaf, which is when bears are stronger, it will want to attack and drive us out in order to get the territory it wants."

Hailstorm blinked, eyes wide. "Then why, if it's weak now, is it

attacking cats all over the Clans?"

"Its angry; that's what Star said." Echoheart shuddered. "It's trying to claim the forest as its territory."

"So the prophecy isn't only warning us about a bear, it's warning that the Clans will be driven from their homes? No! We can't be!"

"I know. That's why we need to unite all the Clans. If every single cat in all four Clans fights for our homes, then we may be able to beat this bear. Uniting the Clans will take some time, though, especially after everything that's happened between them in the past."

"If they're desperate, they'll agree. Don't worry. They'll do anything to protect their homes, their Clanmates, and their families. You'll see," Hailstorm murmured.

Echoheart blinked. "I hope so." It was still overwhelming, especially with how close it was getting. "We'll need some time. And with new-leaf coming closer each day, the sooner we inform the Clans the better. I... I think... maybe we might have to do it at the next Gathering."

Hailstorm gasped. "That soon? That's in a few days! No, I'd wait, at least until you know for sure it is a bear. You, Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and Star should take a patrol sometime and look around for any scents that Star could recognize as a bear. Then you need to tell all of DawnClan, which will take some convincing since all of them hardly believe a bear is real. You'll need proof. Some will take your word for it, but others will be skeptical. They want something concrete to blame. Something they can easily get revenge on, like Rainstar." He paused. "And only *after* you convince DawnClan should you tell the other Clans at a Gathering. Wait another moon. It *could* be Rainstar, even if the bear is a more likely a reason. Find out for sure first."

Echoheart nodded. "Good idea. We can take the evening patrol tomorrow: me, you, Star, Bumblefrost, and Eveningstar—"

"Eveningstar?"

"Star is telling him today. He's the Clan leader. He should know." Echoheart paused. "Can you promise me something?"

"Of course."

"Don't tell any other cat what I've just been telling you. Let them still believe it's Rainstar. When *Eveningstar* is ready for the Clan to know, we'll tell them. Okay?"

"I won't tell anyone," Hailstorm promised. Then he turned forward as they crossed the stream. Echoheart pressed her shoulder against his, then followed him across the log-bridge.

Echoheart watched Needlepaw and Cherrypaw, leaping through the snow drifts that still hadn't melted from the previous few snow storms. Cherrypaw ran up from behind the silver tabby apprentice and shoved into him. Needlepaw let out a huff of breath, then turned and pushed her into the snow, laughing. "Ha! Got you back!"

Echoheart snorted.

"Needlepaw, Cherrypaw," Creekfall meowed sternly. "This is a patrol, not a play session."

"Oh, come on, Creekfall," Aspenleaf meowed. "They're only having fun. There isn't much of that to come by these days. And we haven't reached any borders yet."

Creekfall grunted. "Just *try* to act like behaved apprentices, okay?"

Needlepaw nodded, looking a little downcast to have disappointed his father. But Cherrypaw nudged Needlepaw again with her shoulder when Creekfall wasn't looking, giggling quietly.

"You've sure got your paws full with that apprentice," Hailstorm murmured in amusement. "She doesn't listen to anyone."

Echoheart nodded. "Yeah, true. But she's eager to learn everything, and listens to me now, thank StarClan."

Hailstorm chuckled.

"We're going to check the far border first," Creekfall announced from up ahead. "Then we'll follow the river downstream along the DayClan border and to the Thunderpath and NightClan's border."

Everyone nodded, then followed the silver warrior toward the right, toward the far border that DawnClan didn't share with another Clan. That border was quiet. Cherrypaw and Needlepaw got to help remark the borders for the first time, and Cherrypaw had been thrilled.

Echoheart trotted beside her apprentice as they neared the riverbank. The grass in the meadow was cold and hard on their paws; the tall, brown blades hung with the heavy weight of the frost. Parts of the river were iced over, and Echoheart imagined that the water was very, *very* cold, and she shivered. The sky was covered in high, gray clouds that had taken the previous blue sky away from them. A chilly breeze swept from the moor, carrying the sharp scent of cold moisture that stung Echoheart's nose.

Cherrypaw shivered violently. "It got cold fast!" she meowed, teeth chattering loudly.

Needlepaw nodded in agreement, the tips of his whiskers hanging down with frost.

Aspenleaf sighed. "Another storm's coming I think. We'd better hurry. Creekfall: you, Needlepaw, and I will remark the border from here to the stepping-stones, and Hailstorm, Echoheart, and Cherrypaw, you'll remark from the stepping-stones to the Thunderpath. Well meet you at the Thunderpath."

Echoheart nodded, then lead the way quickly to the stepping stones protruding from the icy water. Then she, Hailstorm, and Cherrypaw, through chattering teeth and spiked fur, remarked the border.

"Hey!" a voice shouted.

Echoheart looked up at Hailstorm. "What?" she asked.

"That wasn't me," Hailstorm replied in confusion.

"Hey!"

"Cherrypaw?" Echoheart hollered.

"It wasn't me either!" Cherrypaw shouted, emerging from the frozen reads after remarking the border.

Echoheart looked at Aspenleaf, Creekfall, and Needlepaw upstream, hardly visible in the thickening fog. But from what she could see, they weren't the ones yelling either. They seemed to have heard it too, and were jogging towards them.

"Who was that?" Aspenleaf called.

"Hello?"

"There!" Needlepaw called, pointing across the river at a large silhouette approaching them.

Echoheart narrowed her eyes in scrutiny, trying to make out the shape. As it got closer, she realized it was more than one shape, and the shapes were cats.

"DayClan cats!" Cherrypaw exclaimed in fear, red fur on end.

"They sound worried," Hailstorm commented.

"What do you want?" Creekfall called, stepping in front of his mate and son to shield them.

"Creekfall," Aspenleaf scolded. "They sound scared. Give them a chance to explain."

As they got closer, Echoheart could see who it was: Clayfur and Coalpelt, with their apprentices Waterpaw and Olivepaw. Their faces were stark with horror, bland, and devoid of the usual sneers on their faces. This really worried Echoheart. If these DayClan cats, who were normally vicious and protective, were scared, something really bad must have happened.

"Clayfur?" Creekfall asked the DayClan deputy in confusion as he saw their expressions. Then he whispered to Echoheart, Aspenleaf,

Hailstorm, and the two apprentices, "Don't say anything. I'll deal with it."

"We... came to the nearest cats we could. We need to ask you something. This has happened before... But I never thought... to... *DayClan*..."

Echoheart's blood turned to ice. She knew where this was going to go.

"What?" Creekfall demanded.

"We haven't even gone back to camp yet!" Olivepaw screeched, dark gray fur on edge and green eyes wide in horror. His sister, Waterpaw, nodded next to him, her gray tabby body shivering.

Coalpelt turned to the apprentices and shushed them sternly.

Clayfur spoke up again, shouting through the freezing wind to the DawnClan cats across the river. "We were patrolling the borders... and... it's happened to us! Songtail is dead! Bloodied, frozen solid, mauled, mangled, broken, body parts missing, frozen to the ground in her frozen pool of blood!"

Echoheart resisted the urge to vomit, but Needlepaw didn't do so well. He gagged, staggered, them turned and stumbled into the reeds by the river. Cherrypaw cringed against Echoheart, jerking with the effort of trying not to gag. Hailstorm pressed into Echoheart's other side, shaking with what Echoheart thought was fear and disgust. Aspenleaf was shaking her head vigorously, and Creekfall was stiff.

"Like Freezepaw, Robintail, and Goldheart?" Creekfall shouted, voice filled with disgust.

Coalpelt nodded slowly.

"Wait, what? Goldheart is dead?" Clayfur exclaimed, yellow eyes narrowed.

They all nodded sadly.

"Then it's happened to all of us; all four Clans," Clayfur commented angrily.

"But we never thought Rainstar would attack DayClan! Her own Clan!" Coalpelt snarled.

"She wants revenge on all the Clans," Creekfall growled.

"But there was something weird about the smell on her body," Olivepaw started, eyes shut tight.

Coalpelt silenced her with a shake of his head. "No. That was just... just the blood and..."

"But there was!" Waterpaw insisted. "*You* even said it didn't smell like Rainstar's scent on Songtail's body!"

"Yes, but it had to have been Rainstar that killed her; what else could it be? We didn't smell any badgers or foxes near her body. But the scent doesn't matter anymore; we need revenge."

Creekfall nodded. "I'm sorry, Clayfur. I will tell Eveningstar of this terrible news. We need to keep the whole forest informed so we can keep track of Rainstar's movements."

"And I'll tell Nettlestar yours," Clayfur meowed with deep sadness, dipping his head, then, leading his Clanmates, he headed back toward their camp.

Hailstorm leaned toward Echoheart as the four DayClan cats walked away and whispered, "This is very weird. DayClan cats showing respect toward other Clans! Just a few seasons ago we were all on edge and invading DayClan's camp. Everyone hated each other! Maybe you'll have an easy chance of uniting all the Clans after all," he added in an even quieter voice.

Echoheart nodded, hardly thinking about that at the moment. *So Whispersong was right. Every time one of us sees those StarClan-ridden eyes, some cat dies!* Echoheart shuddered. She silently prayed to StarClan: *don't let any other cat die! Guide us, tell us what we need to do!*Then Echoheart turned and looked toward the far side of DayClan, toward the mountains. Even though she couldn't see it,

she knew the sky above the mountains was filled with Star's ancestors. For the first time, Echoheart prayed to the Tribe of Endless Hunting.

Please don't send us that sign anymore! Please, if you have any power over the prophecy, any say with StarClan, don't let another cat die! Show us what we need to do next! Tell Star what her destiny is; I know it has to do with StarClan's prophecy! And please, both StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting, lead us from these dark shadows taking over our world!

Chapter 14

Whispersong sat still as stone, watching the fog roll in and the cold blow with it. Her earlier conversation with Star and Echoheart still lingered in her mind, and she couldn't keep it away.

Some cat is going to die soon. Someone is going to die... Whispersong thought over and over again. Images of Aspenleaf, Creekfall, and Hailstorm carrying back Echoheart's limp, bloodied body flashed in her mind. *No*, she told herself. No one was going to die *that* soon! And StarClan would never let a cat part of a prophecy die, would they? But then Whispersong thought: *do they even have control over death?* This worried Whispersong more because if StarClan had no control over death, then Echoheart could very well be murdered next. She shuddered, and tried to convince herself that that would never happen.

We need to keep every cat in camp, where they'll be safe. But then she realized that that would be of no use. Whispersong shut her eyes and let out a very uneven breath. *There's just no way out of this darkness!* she thought in despair.

Jasminekit let out a cry, which shoved these thoughts from Whispersong's mind. Why did she have to have a young kit *now*, when there was no hope for life?

Jasminekit whimpered.

"Oh, my dear Jasminekit. I promise I'll never let anything hurt you. I'll protect you with my life, and so will your father. I promise," she choked, tears spilling from her eyes. She curled up around her daughter's tiny silver body, and her small purr told Whispersong that there would be hope, there would be life, there would again be happiness; they just had to fight for it, and Whispersong would fight for it with all the strength in her body. *As long as I have breath in my body, I will protect you*; *you'll be safe*, she vowed silently.

* * *

"Whispersong!" a voice rang in her head.

Whispersong's eyes flew open in an instant, and she looked up at a cat's silhouette.

Bumblefrost was standing over her, looking worried. "The dawn patrol finally returned, and they say they have bad news. They're waiting for the whole Clan to gather."

Whispersong bolted upright, heart beating irregularly with fear. She started to dash out the den, then stopped. Jasminekit was still asleep. Whispersong didn't want to leave her.

"I'll watch her," Meadowheart meowed, looking concerned, her four kits curled up with sleep beside her. "Go see what happened."

Whispersong hesitated, but she trusted Meadowheart. Whispersong nodded at the tortoiseshell and white queen, then ran from the den after Bumblefrost.

Echoheart was there. Whispersong sighed in relief. Echoheart was there, and so was the rest of the patrol that had left earlier. Echoheart, Hailstorm, Cherrypaw, Needlepaw, Aspenleaf, and Creekfall sat together, all facing Sunfur. Eveningstar must have gone training with Star, so the dawn patrol turned to the deputy to convey their news.

"Okay, so what is it?" Sunfur demanded.

"Is the whole Clan gathered?" Aspenleaf asked, voice strained.

Sunfur nodded. "The rest of the Clan is on hunting patrols or training apprentices. So what is it? What happened?" she repeated, tail lashing.

Creekfall stepped forward, taking a deep breath. "We were remarking the DayClan border, and we saw a DayClan patrol coming to the riverbank across from us, looking terrified," he began in a whisper, gray eyes clouded.

Bronzepelt sputtered in disbelief. "DayClan, *terrified*?"

Echoheart and Hailstorm nodded in sync.

"*Why*?" Eaglefeather demanded.

"They told us, well..." Aspenleaf sighed. "Songtail's dead."

Whispersong froze, and Bumblefrost stiffened next to her.

Songtail? Dead? She had known some cat was going to die... but she couldn't believe it'd be *this* soon. Whispersong felt a rush of anger. She couldn't take this death. She couldn't. Especially since it was so soon after she saw those eyes.

Then a rush of sadness gripped Whispersong. She never thought she'd feel sorry for the DayClan she-cat, especially after she'd nearly clawed Whispersong to pieces in battles, and verbally and physically attacked her for being close with Bumblefrost. She and Songtail had always hated each other, but now Whispersong couldn't help but feel sorry for her. No one deserved to be attacked, mauled, *murdered* like the bear did to her and all those other cats. *No* one did.

Whispersong turned to Bumblefrost, gulping, wanting to say something to him, to comfort him. But he was gone. Whispersong whipped her head around and saw him sprinting from the camp. Her heart skipped a beat. She looked around. No one was paying any attention to her, or to Bumblefrost; all eyes were on the dawn patrol. Whispersong bolted after Bumblefrost, the freezing wind clawing her face.

"Bumblefrost!" she hollered as she spotted him ahead of her, the thick fog obscuring his quickly disappearing body. Whispersong panted. She hadn't run like this in a while; she was out of shape. But she ignored the throbbing in her lungs and pushed on after her mate. "BUMBLEFROST!" she shrieked. "STOP! THE BEAR COULD STILL BE OUT THERE! DO YOU HEAR ME? BUMBLEFROST!" she yowled desperately, panting harder than ever.

Whispersong's exhaustion was almost too much for her. She wanted to collapse on the ground, but she pushed herself harder, finding an inner strength as she sprinted relentlessly after Bumblefrost. She

was catching up to him. Bumblefrost was slowing down. His legs were wobbling, his shoulders were shaking, his head was hanging. Then he collapsed to the cold, frozen ground, shivering and shaking.

Whispersong ran up to him, panting uncontrollably. She collapsed beside him. "Don't... don't run away... like that! You scared... you scared me!"

Bumblefrost didn't answer. His shoulders shook harder.

"Bumblefrost?" Whispersong took a deep breath. "Oh, Bumblefrost, I'm so sorry... I know she was your sister, and-"

"I never even got to see her when we got back from the mountains," Bumblefrost breathed, voice ragged with grief. "And now... she's gone."

"I... I thought you never wanted to see her again."

"She's my sister, Whispersong! The cat I grew up with, the cat I trained beside, my *sister*!" Bumblefrost exclaimed.

"But she agreed with Rainstar, helped Rainstar!"

"We *all* helped Rainstar, Whispersong. We didn't know what else to do; we were all manipulated by her and her plans! We weren't trying to do harm. All we knew was to follow our leader's orders, like the warrior code says! It wasn't Songtail's fault! Rainstar has a way of making us do what she wants, like now-" he cut off, looking away and sighing unevenly.

"But you said-"

"No matter what happened, she was still my sister," Bumblefrost meowed firmly, voice faltering.

"I know, but... but at a Gathering while we were gone Songtail said that you were no longer her brother; and if you ever set foot in DayClan territory again she'd chase you out without mercy!" Whispersong argued.

Bumblefrost didn't seem to have heard her. "I never got to apologize for this! I could have seen her again, could have told her at a Gathering-"

Whispersong was completely taken aback. "*Apologize*? For what? Loving me?" she exclaimed angrily.

"Well-"

"You'd *say* that? You chose this; you... you chose me!" Whispersong choked, shocked. It felt as though Bumblefrost had just punctured a hole in her heart. "You chose me over her! You chose to leave your Clan and your *sister* behind to go to the mountains and help me, protect me! Do you regret that now?" Whispersong shouted, tears stinging her face in the icy fog. She was backing away from him now; it was as if she was looking at a completely different cat, an untrustworthy cat who had no problem hurting her. Whispersong let out a growl. "You could have very well stayed in DayClan; maybe you should've stayed there, where you *truly belong*. You can just march right on back right now if you so desire!"

Bumblefrost looked shocked and hurt. "You want me to leave?"

"I don't want to live with a cat who regrets loving me!" she cried, voice faltering, still backing away from him.

"Whispersong, listen to me right now!" Bumblefrost growled, squaring up to her. Whispersong flinched. "I do not regret choosing you! I love you more than words can tell, more than my own life; I risk it *every day* for you! I love our precious daughter, *our* daughter! How could you say that I regret loving you? You have to understand that you're not the only cat I loved! You'll always be my mate, my best friend, no matter who or what steps between us. But you love your sister, and your parents, even after they hated you for loving me. And I understand that. Now *you* have to understand that I loved *my* sister! I'll always love her no matter what, like you love Echoheart no matter what. And I just wanted a chance to see Songtail again, and now... now..." Bumblefrost crumpled back toward the ground, shaking.

Whispersong was stiff. She laid beside him, feeling guilty. "I'm... I'm

sorry Bumblefrost." Bumblefrost didn't say anything, but he leaned into her fur, and Whispersong knew that he had never regretted loving her, that he would always love her. And Whispersong would always love him, no matter what.

* * *

A full moon glowed weakly on the horizon through the fog hanging over the forest. Whispersong was sitting at the nursery entrance, watching all her Clanmates gather at the base of the High-stone, waiting for Eveningstar to announce the Gathering patrol. Whispersong would've joined them, but Jasminekit was just over a half-moon old and was still too young to leave the nursery; so Whispersong watched from the den while Jasminekit slept soundly on their nest.

Whispersong looked at all the cats gathered in the clearing and noticed that, again, Bumblefrost was not in the camp. He hadn't been in the camp since dawn. He was still grieving for his dead sister, and Whispersong couldn't blame him; but it'd been like he wasn't even *alive* these past few days because he'd been gone from camp so often.

Whispersong turned back toward Jasminekit as she heard her squeal. Whispersong padded toward the back of the den and curled around her daughter's small body, licking her gently between the ears with a purr. Jasminekit blinked her eyes open and stared up at Whispersong with wide eyes. Her eyes had rapidly changed in the past quarter-moon from the dark blue they were originally to a soft, pale green just like her father's. Whispersong smiled.

There was a rustle as some cat stepped inside the nursery. Whispersong looked up and saw Echoheart, followed by Sparktail. Whispersong blinked in surprise.

Echoheart took a deep breath, then meowed, "Whispersong, Eveningstar wants you on the Gathering patrol."

Whispersong narrowed her eyes in disbelief. "But... But I'm a *nursery queen*. I need to stay here at camp with my kit!"

Sparktail blinked. "I know. But Eveningstar said he announced at the last Gathering that you and Echoheart were back, so he needs you both to come to this Gathering so the other Clans can see you. And he wants Bumblefrost to come too. Is he here?"

Whispersong shook her head. "No. He's been out in the forest all day, grieving for Songtail."

"Oh," Sparktail murmured; then, not too kindly, she added. "I guess he won't be coming then. I can watch Jasminekit for you while you're gone, if you like. You need to get going; Eveningstar is waiting."

"I shouldn't be going in the first place! Not with a half-moon-old kit!" she hissed.

"You know why Eveningstar wants you to go; otherwise you *would* be staying here." Sparktail looked at her with deep brown eyes. "Go. I'll watch her," she meowed quietly.

Whispersong nodded. "Thank you," she meowed to her mother, then she bent down and licked her daughter's nose. "I love you. Be good, okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

Then she turned and walked away. She could hear Jasminekit's whining, but she had to ignore it. Sparktail would take care of her. She took a deep breath and followed Echoheart out of the nursery without turning back, listening sadly to her daughter's cries echoing in her ears.

"Finally," Gravelpelt growled impatiently as Whispersong and Echoheart reached them.

"It's fine, Gravelpelt. Where's Bumblefrost? I thought he was in the nursery with you," Eveningstar asked Whispersong.

"He's been in the forest, grieving for Songtail," Whispersong replied.

Eveningstar let out an annoyed growl. "I guess he won't be going to the Gathering. Come on."

Whispersong walked beside Echoheart with her head bowed as

Eveningstar lead the way out of camp.

"Jasminekit will be okay," Echoheart meowed.

"I know. I'm just sad that I have to leave her, especially when she's this young. And Bumblefrost isn't even there to watch her." She paused. "He knows it's the night of the Gathering; he should be at camp to hear Eveningstar's Gathering announcement!"

Echoheart didn't reply.

"I know he's grieving, but our kit needs him," Whispersong sighed.

She turned as Clovertail jogged up behind her. "Nervous?" the black she-cat asked.

"A little," Whispersong admitted.

"We haven't been to a Gathering in *moons*. I'm just worried about what the other Clans will think about us having left our Clan for the mountains and all," Echoheart added.

"Well, you *are* part of a prophecy from StarClan. And you needed to go to the mountains as part of it," Clovertail argued. "They'll have to understand."

"But I don't know if they'll believe us, especially since we're not bringing up the prophecy tonight," Echoheart sighed.

Whispersong sighed too. "We'll see."

She looked ahead at the rest of the patrol in front of them. Cherrypaw was prancing next to Sunfur and Eveningstar, but Lilacpaw lagged behind a bit, walking with Sagetail. Bronzepelt and Gravelpelt were beside them, and Yellowflower walked with Moonshine and Star.

"What's that?" Lilacpaw meowed suddenly, looking into the dark, shadowy forest with big yellow eyes. A shape was running toward them, still a distance away.

Eveningstar let out a hiss, back arched.

"It's a cat!" Sunfur growled.

"Maybe it's Rainstar!" wailed Cherrypaw in terror, Lilacpaw stiff beside her.

"Its not Rainstar!" Whispersong meowed as Eveningstar prepared to pounce, recognizing the muscular shape glowing silver in the moonlight. "It's Bumblefrost."

As Bumblefrost reached them, Sunfur snarled, "You gave us a right good scare!"

Eveningstar cut her off. "Where were you? You knew tonight was the Gathering. I chose you to join the Gathering patrol, but you weren't in camp to hear it!"

Bumblefrost blinked. "I was out in the forest. You know my sister was murdered! I needed time... alone."

Eveningstar nodded. "Yes, grieving is a normal thing in times like this, but you have to think about the danger you put yourself in by being in the forest all alone."

"Yeah, Rainstar's somewhere out there," Sparrowtail added with a shudder.

"Rainstar's not the danger," Bumblefrost meowed immediately. "She hasn't killed anyone."

"And how do you know?" Moonshine snapped, green eyes smoldering.

"Uh," Bumblefrost murmured, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

"Why are you defending her?" snarled Bronzepelt.

"He's not defending her," Whispersong spoke up angrily. "He thinks it's another danger, and I think it's something else too." She looked at Eveningstar. Star had told him. He should know what she was referring to.

Eveningstar blinked. "But-"

"What? What other danger?" Sagetail asked in fear. "What don't we know about this 'other' danger'?"

"Tonight's not the night," Eveningstar sighed. "We need to get going to the Gathering."

"I'll... I'll see you tomorrow then," Bumblefrost muttered, looking at Whispersong sadly.

"No. You're coming with us," Eveningstar meowed.

"I am? Aren't you sending me back to camp?"

"No. You were part of the four that came back from the mountains. You need to be there. And plus everyone knows you are living in DawnClan now; if you don't come, every cat will think that we're trying to hide you, or that were ashamed of you."

"Aren't you ashamed of me?" Bumblefrost growled.

"No." Eveningstar answered simply. "You have proven you can be loyal to DawnClan. And tonight I will announce you a full member of this Clan."

"You don't have to," Bumblefrost argued, but he looked happy all the same.

"Come on," Eveningstar meowed. "We need to pick up the pace." Then he sprang from the ground at steady run, and every cat followed behind him.

Whispersong jogged beside Bumblefrost.

"How's Jasminekit? Who's watching her tonight?" he asked.

"She's fine, I guess. She's sad that I have to leave her." Whispersong sighed. "But Sparktail is watching her. She's in good paws."

Bumblefrost nodded.

Whispersong breathed harder as she quickly tired. As she took a deep breath, she got a whiff of freshly-eaten rabbit. On...

Bumblefrost? Whispersong looked at him in confusion. "Why do you smell like rabbit?"

Bumblefrost stiffened as he ran. "I... I hunted."

"Why? You know it's leaf-bare; the Clan needs food!" Whispersong panted. "Good thing Eveningstar, or anybody for that matter, didn't smell it earlier!" she added in a quieter voice. "The Clan must be fed first!"

"Listen. I was out in the forest all day, and I hunted... for myself, obviously..." he meowed awkwardly, avoiding her gaze.

Whispersong blinked, taking a sidelong glance at her mate. Why did it seem like he wasn't telling the truth?

They slowed as they reached the meadow, the moonlit grass of DayClan territory glowing silver across the river. "It feels weird to be entering DayClan territory again," Bumblefrost meowed casually, and Whispersong knew he was trying to change the subject.

Whispersong carefully followed Echoheart across the frozen and somewhat slippery stepping-stones, Bumblefrost close behind. Gravelpelt and Moonshine eyed him warily as he leapt to onto the DayClan riverbank.

Bumblefrost looked around, fur on edge. The moorland glowed eerily in the moonlight, and not a sound filled the air besides the occasional roar of the monsters on the Thunderpath.

Once Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw made it across, Cherrypaw whispered in a shaky voice, "It's scary to be back." Lilacpaw nodded, gulping.

"Let's keep going," Eveningstar urged as he leapt to the bank beside them. "We're a little behind." He jogged downstream, toward the strip of territory by the Thunderpath, where non- DayClan cats had to travel on the nights of Gatherings.

Whispersong watched her sister catch up to her apprentice and tell her, "You can't quite see the Pointed Mountain yet. But it's right off the edge of DayClan territory, so we'll be able to see it soon

enough." Cherrypaw's ears perked and her tail shot up in excitement. Lilacpaw jogged beside her, more cautious and nervous than her sister.

Sunfur, Yellowflower, and Eveningstar were talking, while Moonshine, Clovertail, Gravelpelt, and Star were walking silently beside each other. Bronzepelt and Sagetail watched their daughters ahead of them, and Echoheart and Sparrowtail were behind them. Bumblefrost and Whispersong took up the rear, trotting side by side.

Bumblefrost was getting anxious; he kept looking around him every few heartbeats, and his ears were perked. Whispersong blinked. "No cat will attack us, Bumblefrost. It's the full moon; there's a truce."

Bumblefrost blinked. "I know that. It's just... what will they think of me? As a *DawnClan* cat now?"

Whispersong sighed. "You'll have to be prepared for criticism, but so will the rest of this patrol, especially Eveningstar for letting you join DawnClan."

"I just hope it'll go over as smoothly as it can," Bumblefrost murmured.

"Me too."

"I see it! I see it! I see it!" Cherrypaw yowled, bouncing atop one of the moor's many boulders. The Pointed Mountain was now visible in the distance, towering above the gradually- sloping foothills.

"Cherrypaw, get down from there!" Sagetail growled impatiently. "This isn't your territory to do whatever you want in!" Bronzepelt let out an annoyed sigh as Cherrypaw rolled her eyes then leapt from the boulder. Echoheart scolded her, reminding her whose territory it was, and that we did *not* want to mess with DayClan. Cherrypaw nodded, then padded beside Lilacpaw slowly.

Eveningstar watched the troublesome red-furred apprentice, shaking his head with a smirk on his face. Then he fell back to walk with Whispersong and Bumblefrost, and beckoned for Echoheart to

join them.

Eveningstar looked at the three of them sternly. "Be ready for a lot of questions. When they ask why you left, only say that it was a dream from StarClan, and that Bumblefrost *was* a part of the dream." His voice quieted. "I mentioned this to Star last time, and I've spoken to the other warriors, though they don't know much about it... but do *not* mention the prophecy. Only when you think it is time to unite the Clans should you announce it. We don't need to cause pandemonium where it's not needed."

"But it can give them an explanation as to why their Clanmates are dying and disappearing, can't it?" Bumblefrost asked.

"Yes, true, but not even DawnClan knows that the thing killing all these cats isn't Rainstar, but that StarClan-prophesized danger. You'll have to tell your DawnClan Clanmates before you tell the other three Clans. When it's time, you *will* have to tell them, but as of right now, it's unnecessary."

The three of them nodded. *Good,* Whispersong thought, heart relaxing, *because I am not ready for this yet.*

As the DawnClan patrol reached the base of the Pointed Mountain, they saw the DuskClan patrol just reaching the top of it. The full moon was nearly straight above their heads now.

"Let's go," Sunfur meowed anxiously, and Eveningstar nodded, leaping onto the rocky slope. Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw shared an awed glance, then sprinted after the leader and deputy eagerly. Echoheart and Star followed next, Echoheart looking nervous.

Sparrowtail stood beside Whispersong. "Ready?"

Whispersong nodded, then dashed after her sister up the rocky hill, Sparrowtail and Bumblefrost just behind her. The rest of the patrol followed closely, and soon they were at the top.

Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw panted, then gasped as they stood on the top of the sacred mountain and got a first glance of the Lightning Tree.

"I can't believe we're here," Lilacpaw whispered in awe.

"Look! There's some DayClan cats," Cherrypaw gasped, fur bristling in terror.

Lilacpaw gulped. "Hawktuft. And Clayfur."

Whispersong watched the young she-cats sadly, knowing that all the horrible memories of those DayClan cats were coming back to them.

Echoheart walked up to the apprentices. "They can't hurt you; there's a truce. And they were only doing those things to you because Rainstar ordered them to. Yes, their actions will never be justified or forgivable, but I will bet you they will never do anything like that ever again now that Rainstar is gone from DayClan." She paused, then added, "Look, DayClan has two apprentices, who were too young to remember what their Clan did to you two. They won't remember Rainstar. I bet they're nice."

"Olivepaw and Waterpaw," Cherrypaw murmured. "We saw them on patrol when they... told us about Songtail."

Echoheart nodded. "Go say hi. Make the most of your first Gathering."

"Just remember not to give anything away that can be used against us, okay?" Sunfur added. "Not that DayClan is thinking of attacking, we just need to be cautious. Understand?"

The two apprentices nodded.

"Be good," Sagetail meowed, mainly looking at Cherrypaw. Bronzepelt eyed both of his daughters sternly but proudly.

Cherrypaw rolled her eyes. "We *will*."

Whispersong turned as more cats approached behind them. NightClan had finally arrived. They passed, nodding respectfully at all the DawnClan cats. Many took a double take as they saw Bumblefrost, and their mouths gaped, as if they hadn't believed what Eveningstar had said about Bumblefrost at the last Gathering.

Cliffsand widened her eyes as she passed. "Echoheart?"

Echoheart smiled widely. "Cliffsand!"

"I... I never thought I'd see you!" the pale ginger NightClan she-cat exclaimed. "I mean, Eveningstar announced you had returned and all, but... I just can't believe you're back, after all these moons!"

Echoheart smiled.

"So is it true? You really went to the mountains? Why?"

Whispersong blinked, waiting to see what her sister would tell the NightClan cat.

"Yes, and it was because of a dream from StarClan; we had to."

"Bumblefrost too? I know that DayClan cat went with you," Cliffsand meowed in an undertone. Bumblefrost stiffened next to Whispersong.

"Yes," Echoheart stated simply. Then she changed the subject before Cliffsand could ask any more questions. "I heard you're having kits."

"Yes!" Cliffsand's sky-blue eyes glowed. "Icedapple said they'll be born really soon!"

Echoheart smiled. "That's great! Who's their father?"

"Goosefur," she purred.

"I thought you said he was an annoying furball when you two were apprentices," Echoheart teased, laughing.

"Well, I guess things changed. A lot has changed since you've been gone," the NightClan she-cat sighed.

Echoheart nodded solemnly.

"Bumblefrost?"

Bumblefrost jumped. Whispersong jerked around as someone spoke her mate's name. A dark gray DayClan she-cat was approaching

them, her grass-green eyes narrowed.

"Hello, Nettlestar," Bumblefrost meowed, trying not to look worried.

So this was Nettlestar. Whispersong blinked. She hadn't seen the new DayClan leader yet; she'd seen her before, but only once or twice at Gatherings.

"Welcome back," Nettlestar meowed, then she turned to Whispersong. "You too."

Whispersong nodded slowly. "Thank you." It was strange to have a decent, respectful DayClan leader.

Nettlestar turned back to Bumblefrost. "So you're living with DawnClan now?"

"Yes," Bumblefrost answered curtly. "And don't ask, because I'm not going back to DayClan. Not after everything that's happened."

Nettlestar narrowed her eyes, and meowed stiffly, "I wasn't going to ask you. I only want to know why you *want* to live with DawnClan."

Bumblefrost didn't answer.

"So it is really true, then. You love Whispersong." It wasn't a question.

"Why else would I be staying with DawnClan?" Bumblefrost muttered, neck fur bristling. Whispersong nudged him hard in the ribs.

"Of course," Nettlestar muttered. "Well, as long as you're not conspiring against us, like Stormpaw did-"

"Stormpaw came up with the plan to rid you of Rainstar," Whispersong retorted at Nettlestar's disrespect to the dead DayClan apprentice, now trying to keep the frustration out of *her* voice. "Without Stormpaw, Rainstar would still be ruling over you with her tyranny. Without Stormpaw, *you* wouldn't be leading DayClan."

Nettlestar narrowed her eyes. "And without Stormpaw, Bristlepine

wouldn't be dead."

"You know that if Bristlepine hadn't died, he'd be leading DayClan the same way Rainstar did," Bumblefrost retorted, tail twitching.

"You didn't do anything to help Rainstar when DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan were driving Rainstar from your camp," Whispersong meowed quietly. "You don't want to admit it to yourself, but you all wanted her gone when the opportunity arose. And that's not a bad thing," she added quickly as Nettlestar flattened her ears, nose wrinkled in a silent snarl. "Now Rainstar and her tyranny are gone. And I've heard you're doing a good job of bringing your Clan back together."

Nettlestar grunted, "Hmm." And that was all she said. Then she blinked, whipped around, and left them.

"That was interesting," Bumblefrost muttered, letting out a long exhale.

"At least she was kinder about it than others would be," Whispersong meowed quietly, "kinder than *Rainstar* would have been."

Bumblefrost nodded. "She was *way* kinder than Rainstar was to me about leaving DayClan."

Whispersong blinked. "What?"

"I mean, she was way kinder than Rainstar *would* have been," he meowed quietly, looking away.

Whispersong sighed. "Come on; let's go find other cats to talk to."

"I don't really want to," Bumblefrost meowed, shaking his head. "I'll wait here. You say hi to everyone."

Whispersong blinked. "Even if you wait here cats will still talk to you. I see some DuskClan cats that I haven't seen in a while; come with me. You won't have to talk much."

Bumblefrost sighed. "Fine." Then he followed Whispersong across

the clearing.

Whispersong trotted toward Snowfall, Petalheart, and three DuskClan apprentices.

"Whispersong! So it *is* true! You *are* back!" Snowfall purred, her pretty silver and black pelt gleaming in the moonlight.

Whispersong smiled.

"And so it's also true that you and Bumblefrost are mates then," Petalheart commented quietly, teal eyes watching Bumblefrost warily.

"Yes," Whispersong replied curtly.

Snowfall smiled. "Hello, Bumblefrost."

Bumblefrost looked happy not to be sneered at. He blinked respectfully in response.

"What are your names again?" Whispersong asked, turning to the three young apprentices.

"I'm... I'm Beepaw," spoke up the yellow tabby tom shyly.

"I'm Windpaw," the siamese tom meowed proudly, bright blue eyes shining.

"And I'm Elmpaw," the cream she-cat with brown stripes murmured, staring down at her paws.

"Hello," Whispersong meowed with a nod.

"Go find the other apprentices while these warriors talk to us. It'll be more interesting for you anyway with cats your age," Raccoontail meowed, and all three apprentices trotted across the clearing.

"Freezepaw was Elmpaw's sister," Snowfall murmured sadly. "Elmpaw has been a wreck since Freezepaw died; then again, we all have. And it got worse once Mushroomcloud disappeared."

"That's awful," Whispersong murmured. "I'm so sorry."

Snowfall sighed. "We're recovering."

"Who are their mentors?" Whispersong asked in curiosity.

"Falconflight mentors Elmpaw," Raccoontail meowed, motioning towards the DuskClan deputy. "Blizzardclaw mentors Beepaw, and Pantherclaw mentors Windpaw. And... I was... Freezepaw's mentor," Raccoontail finished sadly.

"I'm sorry," Whispersong murmured. This death was too much! Whispersong couldn't take it anymore.

Bumblefrost shook his head, speaking Whispersong's thoughts. "There is too much death and too little happiness left."

"I'm sure there's *some* happiness," Snowfall meowed quietly. "Come on, tell us something good that's happened in DawnClan."

Bumblefrost looked at Whispersong and blinked. "Well," Whispersong meowed, "We had a kit."

"You did?" Snowfall exclaimed. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

Whispersong shrugged, smiling.

"She-kit or tom-kit?" the silver and black warrior pressed.

"She-kit," Whispersong purred. "And her name is Jasminekit."

"Well, StarClan be with you in her safety during these dark times," Raccoontail meowed, shaking his head.

Bumblefrost nodded sadly.

"Snowfall!" Every cat turned. Pebbletail was trotting up to the DuskClan cats, with Rippleclaw behind her. Whispersong saw this as a sign to leave, so she meowed her goodbyes to Raccoontail and Snowfall, then lead Bumblefrost to another part of the clearing.

"Come on, Whispersong," Bumblefrost meowed suddenly, running

toward a thick patch of gorse bushes. Whispersong smiled, then raced after Bumblefrost through the bushes and down the Pointed Mountain. They skidded to a halt in front of a pile of gray-brown boulders, and happy memories flooded back to Whispersong.

Chapter 15

CaveClan, Whispersong thought with a smile.

"Remember this place?" asked Bumblefrost, chuckling slightly. His pale green eyes were shining in the moonlight as he stood outside the cave they had played in when they were younger.

"How could I forget?" Whispersong laughed, smiling warmly at Bumblefrost.

"Well, after you, Whisperstar."

"Of course, Bumbleclaw," Whispersong purred, flicking her tail over her mate's nose playfully as she squeezed through the cave entrance. Bumblefrost followed shortly behind her.

"Look!" Whispersong exclaimed to Bumblefrost, looking at a small ledge protruding from the stone wall. "This was the High-step!"

Bumblefrost laughed. "You couldn't fit on it now!" he joked.

"Are you calling me fat?" Whispersong asked, butting him with her shoulder playfully.

Bumblefrost nudged her back. "Maybe," he whispered mischievously.

Whispersong scoffed. "You wouldn't!" she growled playfully, swatting him around the ears.

Bumblefrost chuckled, grabbing her around the stomach and pulling her to the ground. Whispersong let out a meow of surprise. Bumblefrost wrestled her onto her back and held her firmly to the ground.

Whispersong rolled her eyes and laughed. "Get off me, you great lump."

Bumblefrost smiled and let out a breath of laughter. "Oh, I love you, Whispersong," he murmured. Then his eyes dulled and his smile faded away. He leaned back and let Whispersong up, staring blankly at the cave walls.

"What's wrong?" Whispersong asked, sitting up and facing Bumblefrost.

"This will end badly. I can feel it."

"What will? Us? No, it can't, Bumblefrost. You're in DawnClan now —"

"No, not us, just... oh, I don't know."

"Are... Are you talking about the prophecy? StarClan will guide us through this, Bumblefrost, I know—"

"But what if the bear isn't the only thing threatening us right now?" Bumblefrost interrupted, finally meeting Whispersong's eyes with a look of worry on his face. His voice lowered to barely a whisper. "I feel like I'm the double agent, like I have a paw in two worlds, in two dangerously controversial worlds..."

Whispersong was getting very confused. "How? You live in DawnClan now; your loyalty is with DawnClan." She paused. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, but I—," he broke off, looking away with a sigh. Then, after a few heartbeats, he looked back at Whispersong with a strange intensity in his green eyes. "You're in danger, all of DawnClan is, especially you and Jasminekit."

"Yeah, we know *everyone's* in danger; the prophecy is coming true! The bear is out there..." Whispersong meowed, but her fear was growing at Bumblefrost's words.

"There are other things out there too," he whispered, eyes staring blankly and worriedly.

"Like what?" Whispersong asked, heart thumping. What did he know that she didn't?

Bumblefrost didn't answer.

"How? Bumblefrost? Tell me what's going on! Why are Jasminekit and I in more danger than other cats?"

He still didn't answer.

"Bumblefrost!" Whispersong exclaimed fearfully, her heart racing.

Bumblefrost sighed deeply and unevenly. "I can't tell you; it'd just put you in even more danger..." He paused, as if he wanted to tell Whispersong more. He looked at her sadly. "I wish I could, but..." he sighed, "you'll understand later, hopefully, if I can get out of this." Then he shook his head, and when he spoke again, it was as if their previous conversation had never happened. "Come on, the Gathering is going to start." He whisked past her and left the cave without another word.

Whispersong blinked, fear in her heart. Then she followed her mate from the den, through the bushes, and into the moonlit clearing again. Cats were already sitting together, listening to Orangestar speak. Whispersong crept forward, finding Echoheart sitting beside Clovertail and Cherrypaw. Whispersong squeezed through the crowd and sat next to her sister. Bumblefrost sat down behind her, still looking reserved and fearful.

"Where were you?" Echoheart hissed as soon as she spotted Whispersong. "The Gathering started a while ago!"

Whispersong looked up at the moon, which was well above their heads by now. "I... lost track of time, I guess," she whispered.

"Doing what? Orangestar is finishing right now, and Beechstar already spoke! You're lucky Eveningstar didn't announce DawnClan news first, because we will be a part of it! How would it have looked if you weren't here during that announcement?"

Whispersong sighed. "I know. Bumblefrost and I were just walking around the Pointed Mountain together."

"You worried me. I assumed you were with Bumblefrost, but I didn't know!"

"I'm sorry," Whispersong murmured to her sister, tilting her head up toward Orangestar, who was finishing up.

"...other than that, DuskClan is doing pretty well this leaf-bare," the ginger- and white-patched tom concluded, stepping back. He dipped his head and let Nettlestar speak next.

The dark gray she-cat leaned forward on the branch of the Lightning Tree, then raised her voice and yowled, "No cat in DayClan has been seriously infected by sickness this leaf-bare, thank StarClan. But just a few sunrises ago, our dawn patrol came across the dead body of one of our Clanmates," she paused, sighing sadly. "Songtail. She was murdered, like the other cats have been described: hardly recognizable and utterly destroyed. We hope she didn't suffer too much in the last moments of her life, and that she made it safely to StarClan. We never believed Rainstar would attack cats from her former Clan—"

"But it's not Rainstar!" Star hissed under her breath to Whispersong and Echoheart.

Clovertail overheard. "What?"

"Nothing," Echoheart meowed quickly, flicking her tail dismissively and staring at Nettlestar.

Clovertail blinked in confusion then turned her attention back to the DayClan leader, and Whispersong did the same.

"...need to find Rainstar and put an end to this murderous rave, this tyranny. The Clans can only be safe once her threat is completely gone. We all thought that since Rainstar was driven from DayClan, she'd leave for good. But we shouldn't have been so flea-brained. We should have known Rainstar would retaliate and seek revenge. We need to stop her for good, and if that means killing her, then I will do it to protect my Clanmates."

"But how many lives does she have left?" asked Blizzardclaw, the white DuskClan tom.

Lilyfoot sat taller beside the other medicine cats. "When she was

driven from DayClan, she had three lives left. She may have lost one while exiled, but we don't know for sure."

"Well, then it'll be really hard to rid the forest of her," Duckflight growled. "How many times do we have to kill her until she's gone?"

"As many times as it takes," Nettlestar replied with forcefulness. "I hate to have to take extreme measures and *kill* her... someone I used to look up to—"

"It's not like DayClan hasn't killed before!" Pantherclaw yowled from the DuskClan crowd, black pelt bristled.

"Yeah, DayClan killed my innocent kit!" Gingerfur cried out.

"As well my adopted son!" Larksong shouted, brown tabby ears flattened. "Don't act like you haven't killed before!"

"*Rainstar* killed those kits," Nettlestar growled solemnly, surprisingly calm. "No other DayClan cat killed kits."

"Yes, but *you* kidnapped them!" Bronzepelt yowled. Lilacpaw and Cherrypaw crouched low, nodding in agreement with their father.

"On Rainstar's orders," Weedfoot growled.

"Rainstar is solely responsible!" Foxfang meowed loudly, ginger fur fluffing up.

"Yes, the crimes are unforgivable, but Rainstar is the cat to blame, not all of DayClan!" Caverntooth yowled with his teeth bared.

"Let's not bring this up again! It's in the past; it's been sorted out!" Nettlestar yowled above the angry conversations among the cats below her. The clearing slowly quieted, though everyone still looked on edge. "What I was saying," Nettlestar meowed, "is that we need to get rid of Rainstar. She killed so many cats, so she deserves to have done to her what she did to so many others."

Everyone nodded in agreement to the DayClan leader's suggestion, especially from NightClan, which had the most cats killed because of Rainstar's plans.

"So if any of you see her, can we agree to try and get rid of her?" Nettlestar asked, looking at the three other leaders.

Beechstar and Orangestar nodded, and Eveningstar meowed, "We should all avenge the awful deaths Rainstar has brought about in the Clans." Then he looked at Whispersong, Echoheart, and Star. And Whispersong knew what his look said: *even though not* all *the deaths were caused by Rainstar.*

"Other than that, DayClan has no news," Nettlestar finished, sitting back.

Eveningstar now sat taller, gray flecked fur aglow in the moonlight. He looked out over the clearing with an air of authority, then raised his voice and yowled, "DawnClan hasn't had any cases of serious sickness this season, thank StarClan, but we too have been affected by this hidden danger this past moon—"

"Hidden? It's obviously Rainstar!" some cat shouted angrily from the crowd.

Eveningstar ignored the interruption. "Just around a half-moon ago, Goldheart was found dead, just as mauled and destroyed as the other cats have been."

Everyone looked shocked that a medicine cat had been killed, and they all bowed their heads, especially the other medicine cats who had all known Goldheart well.

"DawnClan also named two new apprentices these last two moons: Cherrypaw and Lilacpaw."

The two young she-cats had wide eyes as the clearing echoed with their own names. Cherrypaw sat tall and proud, and Lilacpaw looked more shy but proud all the same.

Eveningstar smiled, then the chanting finished. "Now," he continued, taking a deep breath, "as most of you may have noticed, Echoheart and Whispersong have joined us tonight."

Every cat turned to stare wide-eyed at Echoheart and Whispersong. Whispersong blinked and tried not to look nervous under the

intense stares.

"And, as I said at the last Gathering, they have returned from the mountains after both had a dream from StarClan, which—"

"Did they *really*, though?" Duckflight yowled from the NightClan crowd.

"Yes," Sunfur snapped.

Eveningstar gave his deputy a warning glance, then yowled, "Yes, they did. And they have yet to discover the true meaning of why they had to leave."

"They should have to tell us! If StarClan sent two *ordinary* warriors dreams, dreams calling them to the *mountains*, it's got to be important! Its got to affect all of us!" Foxfang growled, and other DayClan cats nodded.

"It's DawnClan's business," Eveningstar replied. "Why should they have to tell you things they hardly even know about?"

Every cat looked smug, and some looked suspicious.

Whispersong swallowed. What Eveningstar said was true, sort of. They didn't know for *sure* what was going to happen with the prophecy, but they did know why they'd left for the mountains. Eveningstar was stretching the truth a little, and even though he was doing it for everyone's good, Whispersong hoped no cat found out. She kept her mouth shut, and so did Echoheart, Bumblefrost, and Star.

"Does it have to do with all the Clans?" Falconflight, the DuskClan deputy, demanded.

"Like I said, they're not sure what it means yet," Eveningstar answered evasively.

"We have the right to know!" Petalheart yelled, lashing her white and orange-striped tail beside the other DuskClan cats.

"I said this is *DawnClan* business," Eveningstar growled stiffly.

Whispersong gulped.

"But if it affects all four Clans, we do have the right to know what's going on!" The NightClan deputy, Mapleleaf, growled up at Eveningstar from the roots of the Lightning Tree.

"Mapleleaf is right—" Beechstar started.

"It is DawnClan's business," Eveningstar repeated firmly. "Listen, you will know eventually; I can promise you that. But as of right now, they don't know enough information to say anything that would benefit you."

And we're not ready to unite the Clans or cause paranoia where it's not needed, thought Whispersong. *We need to know everything we can before we tell everyone.*

"It won't affect the Clans for *moons* from now," Eveningstar added.

Like only two moons from now, Whispersong thought in fright. *When new-leaf comes.*

"Fine," Orangestar meowed to Eveningstar, narrowing his orange eyes. "But you'd better tell us soon. We have a right to know information that affects all the Clans."

"I know," Eveningstar meowed stiffly.

There was a silence, then a cat yowled, "So... where does Bumblefrost play into this? You never mentioned anything about him! What's he doing in the DawnClan crowd?" It was Applefang, shouting above the crowd and staring at the tan and black tabby tom with bared teeth.

Bumblefrost gulped behind Whispersong, glaring at his former mentor.

"He was part of the journey to the mountains," Eveningstar meowed loudly.

Bumblefrost nodded and stared up at Eveningstar nervously, not making eye contact with any cat.

"And he's now living in DawnClan with his mate and his newborn kit. He's proved himself to be a fierce and loyal warrior, and he's found where he truly belongs."

"He's *living* in DawnClan?" Hawktuft asked loudly, her yellow eyes narrowed to slits.

"Yes," Eveningstar replied, turning to speak to the whole clearing. "And tonight I am announcing him as a full member of DawnClan." When the clearing filled with hisses of protest, Eveningstar spoke over them fiercely. "He's made connections I never thought a former DayClan cat would make in DawnClan; he truly has proved himself, and those of you who won't believe his words, believe his actions. He's loved Whispersong and stuck by her this whole time. And they had a daughter a half-moon ago. She will learn from her father the valuable lesson of loyalty, and of staying true to yourself and what you believe in; because her father is one of the bravest cats I've met in a long time; having to go through unacceptance, criticism, isolation, and everything he has... which is why his heart is one of the biggest. He never stopped being kind, and true to his heart, even when everyone around him tried to put him out."

Eveningstar paused. "Many would say that your claws define you, earn you respect in these Clans. They'd say that without your claws, you could not survive. But anyone who says that is wrong. Life isn't about claws and fighting. It *isn't* the size of teeth and claws that earns a cat respect, but the depth of their friendship and the strength of their loyalty. Loyalty binds us to our Clanmates, and it's what defines the warrior code. Bumblefrost has shown this better than any other cat. We have a valuable lesson to learn from him." Eveningstar paused, smiling. "And Bumblefrost, I'm proud to welcome you as a full member of DawnClan."

As Eveningstar finished his powerful speech, the DawnClan side of the clearing erupted into chanting, led by Whispersong. Eveningstar couldn't have phrased it better. Bumblefrost was smiling, and tears were in his eyes. He was overwhelmed with all the support that he never thought in a hundred seasons he'd get. Whispersong licked her mate warmly on the cheek.

Bumblefrost was truly being respected. His dream had finally come

true.

Chapter 16

Echoheart sat tiredly beside Hailstorm, Clovertail, and Rayclaw in the clearing, the late afternoon sunlight dappling their pelts. They shared two meals between them, talking about today's successful hunting patrols.

A half-moon had passed since the Gathering, and Bumblefrost was noticeably happier. The morning after the Gathering, Eveningstar had made another speech to welcome Bumblefrost as a full member of DawnClan, so the cats who hadn't attended the Gathering could see Bumblefrost being welcomed. The new DawnClan warrior had received the same reaction as last night; even Rustypelt had welcomed him.

And during that same Clan meeting, Eveningstar had told the rest of the Clan what Echoheart, Whispersong, and Star were thinking: that the thing killing all these cats wasn't Rainstar after all, but the StarClan-prophesized danger: a bear. It had taken a while to convince every cat, but soon no one could question the fact that Rainstar couldn't have possibly killed all those cats, that the only thing it could be was a bear.

Echoheart looked up from her meal and sighed. Now every cat was talking to her and Whispersong, hoping they had answers to protect them against the bear, and wanting them to tell them all about the prophecy. Echoheart felt a lot of weight on her shoulders, but at least no one was angry with her.

Echoheart turned her head as Whispersong and Bumblefrost padded toward them, Jasminekit trotting clumsily at their heels. Jasminekit had sure grown in the last half-moon.

Clovertail smiled. "She's so cute."

Rayclaw nodded. "She looks just like Whispersong, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but she has Bumblefrost's eyes," Echoheart purred.

"Hello," Whispersong purred as she reached them. Jasminekit hid behind her mother, peering around with her pale green eyes at the four warriors. Bumblefrost chuckled.

Echoheart smiled at her sister's kit. "You sure look so much bigger than the last time I saw you," she meowed quietly.

Jasminekit looked at Whispersong, who nodded. Then the tiny she-kit looked back at Echoheart and squeaked, "I can run fast now."

Echoheart smiled, whiskers quivering in amusement. "Are you as fast as your mother? She's pretty fast."

"Not yet," Jasminekit mewled brightly. "But I am faster than Pollenkit."

"Really?" Bumblefrost meowed playfully. "I don't believe it!"

"Yeah!" Jasminekit persisted, tugging on her father's tail.

"Let's see how fast you can run." Bumblefrost bent over and cuffed his daughter gently around the ears.

Jasminekit nodded eagerly and jogged toward the nursery, tail high in the air.

Echoheart snorted quietly in amusement at the kit's clumsy pace.

As Jasminekit reached the nursery, Pansykit ran up to her and bowled her over. The two were a tiny bundle of spiky fur, giggling and batting at one another playfully.

Pollenkit, Cricketkit, and Acornkit soon followed, pulling their sister off of Jasminekit. Pansykit rounded on Acornkit with a playful growl, and Cricketkit and Pollenkit went to hide in a thick patch of grass with Jasminekit.

Echoheart smiled, remembering when she was that age.

"Hey, Echoheart?"

Echoheart turned at her name. Sunfur was padding toward her with

Moonshine.

"Can you join the evening patrol with us? You weren't on any of the patrols today, and everyone else is exhausted," Sunfur meowed.

"Sure," Echoheart told the deputy. "How many more cats do we need?"

"Eveningstar wants bigger patrols, so we need at least three more," Moonshine meowed.

"We can go," Rayclaw meowed, and Hailstorm and Clovertail nodded, getting to their paws.

"Thank you," Sunfur meowed. "We should leave now and get a head start. The sun will set soon." Echoheart nodded, glancing at the sun sinking toward the horizon.

She meowed a quick goodbye to Whispersong and Bumblefrost, then she followed the deputy across the clearing and out of the camp, with Moonshine, Rayclaw, Hailstorm, and Clovertail behind her.

"We're going to check the NightClan border first," Sunfur meowed from up ahead. The other four warriors nodded. They followed Sunfur away from the setting sun and toward the NightClan border.

As they neared the Thunderpath, the shadows around them grew longer and darker, and the roaring of the monsters was the only sound in the still, cool air besides the DawnClan patrol. The tall pine and aspen trees around them were glowing red in the sunset, and Echoheart was reminded of the dark red sunset in the butterfly wing sign. After that, stars had started falling, and the moon had turned red, and the bear had been attacking... Echoheart shuddered. That time was nearing. She shook the thought away.

Sunfur stopped once they reached the edge of the Thunderpath, and spoke up over the roar of a monster. "Rayclaw, Moonshine, you two can—"

But she was cut off before she could finish; not by a monster, but by a cat.

"Sunfur!"

They all turned. Mapleleaf, Flowersong, Swantail, and Goosefur were calling to them from across the Thunderpath.

Sunfur narrowed her eyes in concern. "What's wrong?" she asked the NightClan deputy.

Mapleleaf shook his head. "We found another murdered cat!"

Echoheart's blood turned to ice.

"But this death," Mapleleaf yowled, "is the strangest of them all. It was Flamethorn we found dead. Her body was on the riverbank in our territory," he yowled, crouching as a monster flew past. "She died the same way as every other cat has, but this time we could see every gouge and every teeth mark," he sighed. "Before, there was too much dried blood clumped in their fur to tell what had happened, but the river washed all the dried blood from Flamethorn's fur. Those claw marks were no cat's," he shuddered, "It hasn't been Rainstar killing these cats."

Echoheart glanced at Hailstorm.

"Plus, Rainstar wouldn't kill Flamethorn, her own daughter," Flowersong meowed, her cream fur bristled.

"You never know; she killed Stormpaw, who was also her own daughter," Rayclaw pointed out, glancing at Echoheart as he finished his statement.

"But," Swantail yowled over the roar of a monster in the distance, "these claw marks were so big I can't even explain it; it was definitely not a cat that killed Flamethorn."

Everyone on the DawnClan patrol shared glances. Eveningstar had already told the whole Clan that it wasn't actually Rainstar killing these cats; it was the StarClan-prophesized danger. And here was more evidence.

"We will tell Eveningstar," Sunfur promised.

"But what could be killing these cats?" Goosefur asked in worry.

"We, uh; we don't know," Sunfur meowed, glancing at Echoheart.

Echoheart blinked. Should they tell these NightClan cats? They had a right to know. The bear affects all the Clans, and StarClan's prophecy was meant to protect all the Clans.

No, Echoheart thought. *We can tell them at the next Gathering, along with the other two Clans. We can't tell them now! It'll cause panic, and the news will spread to the other two Clans like wildfire! The other Clans have to hear this news from me and Whispersong, not from any other cat!*

But Echoheart didn't feel good about lying to these cats.

"We have ideas," Echoheart meowed.

"Does this have anything to do with what was announced at the last Gathering?" Mapleleaf asked, dark orange eyes narrowing. "About why you were chosen by StarClan to go to the mountains? *Does* it affect all four Clans?"

The DawnClan patrol stared at Echoheart. Moonshine was lashing her tail angrily, while Sunfur had her ears flattened. "Echoheart..." the deputy growled warningly. "Eveningstar said not to—"

But Echoheart ignored her. It was *hers* and Whispersong's responsibility to tell the other Clans about the danger, and it was *hers* and Whispersong's choice of how and when to tell the other Clans about it.

"Yes, it does affect all the Clans. And believe me, you have every right to know what is killing all these cats around you. But now is not the time. Trust me, you *will* know. We don't even know everything yet, but we're planning on explaining everything at the next Gathering."

"That's over a half-moon from now!" Swantail exclaimed. "We need to know now!"

"It would take a while to explain everything; and if you knew what

it is that's killing these cats, you'd seek it out without knowing the danger you're putting yourself into," Echoheart sighed.

"But... but..." Flowersong murmured in worry, long cream fur spiking in fear.

"Please, just understand," Echoheart pleaded, feeling more awful by the heartbeat about leaving these cats in the shadows. "The next Gathering will be when we explain everything we know to all of the Clans, and then you will know."

Mapleleaf sighed. "If that is how it must be, then we will wait until the next Gathering."

"Thank you," Echoheart meowed.

The NightClan cats nodded stiffly, and Mapleleaf sighed and meowed, "May StarClan light your paths." Then they all turned and disappeared beyond the bushes.

Sunfur sighed, then turned to Echoheart with a growl. "Why'd you tell them?"

"They deserved to know! It's my choice to tell them," Echoheart exclaimed.

"Yes, but—"

"We'll tell everyone at the next Gathering," Echoheart persisted. "We were going to tell them all whether I told those NightClan cats or not."

Sunfur sighed and nodded. "Alright. Let's just continue the patrol."

The other borders were quiet, and they didn't come across anyone or anything else. Once they returned to camp, Sunfur immediately went to Eveningstar and told him of Flamethorn's death. Moonshine, Hailstorm, Clovertail, and Rayclaw headed to the warriors' den to spread the news. Echoheart however, decided to go to the nursery and tell Whispersong and Bumblefrost.

As she entered the den, she saw Meadowheart's four kits and

Jasminekit playing in the corner, while Meadowheart, Eaglefeather, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost were talking at the other end of the den.

"Hello, Echoheart," Whispersong purred.

"Hi," she sighed. "There's more news."

"What?" Eaglefeather asked in worry.

"We met a NightClan patrol on our patrol. Flamethorn was found dead on the riverbank in their territory; and Mapleleaf said that the claw marks that were everywhere along her pelt were too big to be a cat's."

"So it *is* a bear," Meadowheart breathed.

Echoheart nodded.

Whispersong turned to Echoheart. "I didn't see the eyes last night though. Did you?"

"No." Echoheart shook her head.

"The eyes?" Meadowheart echoed.

"Whispersong and I see a pair of black eyes, bear eyes, everytime something happens with the prophecy; lately it's been before someone dies," Echoheart sighed.

Meadowheart and Eaglefeather widened their eyes.

Whispersong nodded. "Should we see if Star had any dreams?"

"Sure," Echoheart murmured.

"Can you keep an eye on Jasminekit?" Whispersong asked Bumblefrost. "I'll be right back."

Echoheart left the nursery, Whispersong behind her. Echoheart peeked into the apprentices' den, spotting Star's bright silver tabby fur instantly.

"Star," Echoheart hissed. Rosepaw and Cherrypaw lifted their heads groggily. "Can you get Star for me?" she asked them.

Rosepaw nudged Star awake and pointed to Echoheart.

Star nodded, yawned, then left the den. "What happened?" the small silver she-cat asked.

"Have you had any more darkness dreams lately?" Whispersong asked.

"No," Star replied, eyes narrowing in worry. "Why?"

"I was on the evening patrol, and NightClan told us that they'd found Flamethorn dead on the riverbank on their territory."

"Really?" Star asked. "Did any of you see that eyes sign?"

Echoheart and Whispersong shook their heads. Star blinked in confusion.

"Well, she's technically not part of the four Clans anymore; she left to join her mother in exile," Echoheart thought aloud. "So maybe it does make sense that we wouldn't have a sign about her death. StarClan can't watch over cats who've deserted their Clans like she did."

Echoheart and Whispersong nodded.

Star shivered. "Does StarClan watch over me, do you think?"

Whispersong turned to the small she-cat. "Why wouldn't they?"

Star shuffled her paws. "Well, I'm not technically part of the Clans, and I wasn't raised under StarClan; I was raised to follow the Tribe of Endless Hunting..."

"Of course StarClan watches over you!" Echoheart insisted. "When you had dreams from the Tribe of Endless Hunting, calling you to us, a StarClan warrior was there, which meant that both StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting knew that you belonged here, that you had a destiny here. The Tribe of Endless Hunting entrusted

StarClan to watch over you as you left their skies and entered StarClan's. They may not be your ancestors, and you may join The Tribe of Endless Hunting when you die, but StarClan will watch you as long as you have a destiny in the Clans."

Whispersong nodded. "StarClan will watch over you as long as you live here."

Star nodded in understanding. "I know I have a destiny here, and I know that I'm safe in your ancestors' paws until this passes. Even though my heart will always belong to my own ancestors, I'll trust your StarClan to help guide me, and guide everyone, through the next few moons. We're in this together. *Everyone* is in this together, even if not everyone knows it yet."

* * *

A bright, warm sun shone above Echoheart's, Whispersong's, and Star's heads as they lay on the sunning-stones in the middle of the camp. In the last quarter-moon, the weather had warmed significantly, and the trees were starting to bud with new growth. The forest seemed to be at peace, though Echoheart knew it wasn't.

Star sighed. "New-leaf is quickly approaching, isn't it?"

Echoheart nodded, heart thumping. She'd never dreaded new-leaf before, but it was hard not to when she knew how soon the prophecy would be unravelling, how soon Echoheart and Whispersong would need to lead the Clans into the most dangerous battle of DawnClan's, DuskClan's, NightClan's, and DayClan's history.

"Mother! Mother!"

The three cats turned as Jamsinekit sprinted toward them, pale green eyes aglow with excitement. "Look what I found!" The small two-moon-old she-kit dropped a small red flower at her mother's paws, looking proud of herself.

Whispersong stared at the flower, eyes wide. "Th-thanks," she stuttered.

"I'll find more!" Jasminekit squealed, then she ran clumsily back across the camp.

"It's... it's officially new-leaf," Whispersong meowed shakily, staring at the flower, its red petals glowing eerily like blood in the warm, dappled sunlight.

Echoheart, Whispersong, and Star exchanged worried glances.

New-leaf was finally here.

The time has come.

End of Book 5

The story continues in Book 6: Blood Moon

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